

# PLANET STORIES



STRANGE ADVENTURES IN OTHER WORLDS—  
THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

20c

## COLOSSUS OF CHAOS BY NELSON BOND



ADAMANTIS • BRACKETT  
KLINE • PEAROCK • JONES



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# ★ PLANET ★

## ★ STORIES ★

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### A SMASHING PLANET NOVEL

## **COLOSSUS OF CHAOS.** . . . . Nelson S. Bond 2

From the Void it came, born of lifeless space. It drew life from Terra itself, that it might slay those who peopled the earth.

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 Kicks and kudos, bombs and bouquets from the cash customers.

*Cover design by Anderson*

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*Anger filled Colossus' face; he flailed with both arms.*



# Colossus of Chaos

By NELSON S. BOND

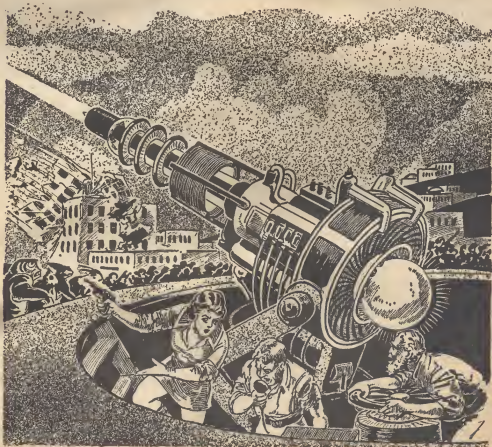
**IT** was the evil spawn of lifeless space, drifting aimlessly until **IT**'s sinister birthing place should come. And finding that abode for life, **IT** grew, sucking energy from Terra itself—gathering strength for that time when all should flee before **IT**'s malign wrath.

**O**UT of the darkness It came. Out of the grim, bleak, froze, incalculable depths of outer space, into the empire of light and warmth . . . and life.

It was like nothing known to Man. It was round, but not quite round; It was hard, but not altogether hard; It was

cold, but not cold with the terrible, utter iciness of things which come from Beyond. It was in motion but It did not move of Its own volition, for It was quiescent, insensate. It let Itself be carried by the vagrant and unpredictable whims of a kinetic universe, confident that in a day

Illustration by Paul



*. . . or a century . . . or a thousand, thousand centuries . . . the fitful fingers of chance would find for It a bourne, a resting-place.*

*Out of the night It came . . . the endless, impenetrable night which spans the void between star and star. Out of one cosmos into another; out of oblivion into waking horror.*

*No eye beheld Its coming. None saw Its faint, thin, cool iridescence; no voice lifted to challenge Its arrival on the sixth satellite of the sixth solar planet. It dropped to earth unwatched, rolled a brief, sluggish way, then rested in a deep, soft, sandy pit.*

*A gray hoar-frost rimed Its surface as the warmth of a friendly orb dispelled the frightful chill of space; a pale mist rose from Its petroid carapace and trembled into the air like a wan and restless ghost.*

*It had found a home, a lair, a birthing-place. With a slow, ecstatic, burrowing motion It dug Itself still deeper into the nourishing sands. It had arrived. It grew. . . .*

## I

"A DANGEROUS place," said the heavy man with ominous deliberation. "A most dangerous place!" He raised his glass to his nostrils, passed it back and forth appreciatively, and rolled a single drop of the liqueur upon his tongue. A smile creased his full, red lips. "Excellent, my dear Captain!" he approved. "A most superior brandy. Allow me to congratulate you. Domrémy-Thol '98, I should judge?"

Captain Burke, skipper of the IPS space-cruiser *Gaea*, basked in the sunshine of his passenger's approbation.

He swirled the liquor in his frosted glass, glanced about the table with a self-satisfied complacency that was almost ludicrous. Then he nodded his head slowly, acknowledging the compliment bestowed upon his judgment in selecting the after-dinner liquor.

"Allow me," he corrected, "to congratulate you, sir, on a truly magnificent palate. You have named the exact vine and season. But . . . danger? You spoke of danger?"

The connoisseur glanced at the young

lady across the table and permitted his eyebrows to arch significantly.

"Perhaps it would be better to abandon the subject," he suggested. "After all, I do not wish to cause Miss Graham undue alarm—"

The girl laughed. She did not seem, noted young Dr. Roswell, occupant of another seat at the captain's table, the least bit perturbed by Grossman's shadowy hint of menace. On the contrary, her already vivid features assumed new color at the scent of danger. Her gray-green eyes brightened, a flush highlighted the natural golden beauty of her cheeks; she bent forward interestedly.

"Please, Mister Grossman . . . don't stop because of me. I want to learn everything I can about Titan. It's going to be my home from now on, you know. I'll learn sooner or later."

"Ye-e-es," acknowledged the heavy man grudgingly, "I suppose that is true. Your father is Commandant of the Space Patrol post at New Boston, isn't he? Hasn't he warned you of the dangers you face in coming to live with him?"

Again the girl laughed.

"Hardly! You see, he doesn't know I'm coming. He'd have conniption fits if he knew I were aboard the *Gaea*. He's a lamb, really, but terribly old-fashioned. 'Women belong on Earth,' you know . . . that sort of thing. He thinks I'm safe in a Terra boarding-school right now. If he dreamed I were less than an hour off Titan—well, I'm afraid he'd be pale violet with anger."

"And," reproved Grossman sternly, "rightly so. Your father is a wise man. Titan is no place for a girl of gentle breeding. It is a vile and treacherous pest-hole. It should never have been opened to Earth colonists!"

Rockingham Roswell coughed gently. The young savant was taller than any man present, and but for the conservative cut of his clothing might have looked his true weight, but he carried himself in such a way as to seem more fragile than he really was. His lean, close-shaven cheeks were pale, and his tow-colored hair was meticulously plastered to his scalp. He wore thick-lensed, tortoise-shell glasses which he removed and polished nervously as he spoke.

"In . . . er . . . in that case, Mister Grossman, it strikes me as a bit odd that you should . . . er . . . have established business headquarters on the satellite."

Grossman glanced sharply at the slender man, snapped impatiently, "A business man cannot always pick and choose his locations, Doctor Roswell. He must follow the path of empire as it leads. Since there are Earthmen on Titan, someone must serve them. It is an obligation which cannot be refused—"

"Er . . . quite!" acknowledged Roswell confusedly. "Job of work to be done . . . noble sacrifice . . . the white man's burden . . . all that sort of rot . . . what?"

Unaccountably, Grossman flushed. "If you are trying to imply, sir," he fumed, "that I have any ulterior motive in establishing a trading post on Titan—"

"Oh, gracious, no! Nothing of the sort. I wouldn't presume to question your . . . er . . . business acumen, Factor. I'm hardly the type, what?" Roswell smiled a faint, thin, apologetic smile. "I mean I . . . er . . . I really don't know much about this sort of thing . . . if you know what I mean. . . ."

CAPTAIN BURKE stared at the younger man impatiently. A space-man toughened in the crucible of action, he had little patience with such learned young fops as this passenger. His words were polite, as befitted the skipper of a luxury liner, but his tone was brushed with acid.

"If you don't mind, Doctor Roswell, Factor Grossman was about to tell us something about the hazards of Titan. Well, Mister Grossman?"

Grossman took another appreciative sip of his brandy, set down the tulip-glass, and steeped his fingers.

"Well, the perils of Titan fall into several classes. Geographic, physiological and racial. In the first place, it is a satellite approximately the size of Earth's moon . . . large enough to sustain life, but small enough to be influenced by the perturbations not only of its massive primary, which lies a scant seven hundred and sixty thousand miles away, but also

by the attractive forces of the Ring and Saturn's eight *other* satellites.

"Evidence of this is the peculiarity interwoven orbit trajectories of Titan and its nearest sister, Hyperion, which sometimes approach each other perilously close. Were Titan a sphere of pumaceous formation, like Luna, it would long since have burst into a million fragments under the impact of these conflicting forces. Fortunately, it is of a basaltic nature, and consequently reasonably stable.

"More immediately hazardous are what might be called the physiological dangers of Titan. These are multifold. To begin with, there is the so-called 'water' of the orb—"

"I've read about that," nodded Captain Burke gravely. "Not water at all, but—"

"But a deadly corrosive acid," finished the speaker, "yes! Happily, the 'seas' of Titan do not cover such a share of the planet's surface as do those of Earth; if they did, no life—either flora or fauna—would ever have developed upon the little world."

His heavy shoulders shivered.

"Still . . . imagine frothing, tide-swept lakes as large as Lake Erie or Victoria Nyanza splashing endlessly at shores until inch by inch and foot by foot those beaches are eroded, rotted, eaten away by the action of the fluid they contain! These are the 'oceans' of Titan. There are four of them, fed by subterranean sources we have not yet discovered. One day they will have completely devoured the parent planet, and Titan will cease to be."

"But that day, of course," interposed the girl, "is a long way off. Is this the only physiological danger?"

"There is one even *more* dreadful. The T-radiation."

"T-radiation? What is that?"

Grossman smiled mirthlessly.

"Were I able to tell you, I should be a greater physicist than any who have so far visited Titan. Dozens of the wisest have come, probed, pondered, analyzed . . . and left Titan none the wiser for their efforts. Frankly, they do not know! The very name 'T-radiation' is an admission of their failure. It is simply an abbreviation for 'Titan-radiation.' It is an electro-magnetic or radioactive emanation

lethal to humans . . . that is all they know about it."

Young Dr. Roswell wiped his spectacles carefully and interrupted, "But . . . er . . . but surely, Factor, these physicists were able to determine the wave-length of the radiation? Did that not tell them—?"

Grossman said bluntly, almost rudely, "The radiation lies in the Hertzian range, Doctor Roswell. Does that knowledge help you any? Perhaps now you can tell us why these rays are deadly?"

ROSWELL flushed and faltered into silence. The girl glanced curiously at Grossman.

"Hertzian range, Factor?"

"Electrical waves ranging between 1 m. and 1/10 c.m. in length, Miss Graham. Their place is between the so-called 'short waves' of radio transmission and the infra-red or heat waves. Their existence has been known, theoretically, for at least two hundred years. But man has never been able to find a reason, a place, or use for them. Nor have they been found to occur freely in nature elsewhere than on Titan."

"And," asked Captain Burke, "you say these waves are deadly to humans? But how, then, have our colonists managed to win and maintain a foothold—"

"I should have said," admitted Grossman, "the waves are deadly to *unshielded* humans. Lead sheathing protects the wearer from harm; consequently men in bulgers are quite safe. And one of the first acts of the Solar Space Patrolmen, upon reaching Titan, was to project a series of leaden highways or avenues between the cities of the satellite. Upon these, and *only* upon these, may Earthmen travel unprotected by bulgers. To stray from one of these roadbeds means exposure to the T-radiation. And that, in turn, means death!"

Rockingham Roswell shuddered delicately. "Beastly!" he murmured. "Deuced unpleasant sort of place, what? But, I say . . . how about the natives? How did they manage to survive before our countrymen built those jolly old lead roadways?"

Grossman pursed his lips impatiently at the affected young scholar.

"They, Doctor Roswell," he said scorn-

fully, "are immune to the T-radiation. Certainly you are acquainted with the principles of selective breeding?"

"Selective—oh, yes! Survival of the fittest . . . all that fiddle-di-diddle? You mean the present Titanians *are* the present Titanians simply because they adapted their physiques to the surroundings, eh? Why, rather! That's clear enough. Still, if they can stand the radiation, I don't see why other humans—"

"Other *humans*!" Grossman laughed curtly. "My dear Doctor, it is obvious you have never seen a Titanian. Human, indeed! Why, it is the dissimilarity between the Titanians and ourselves which led me to name racial divergence as among the hazards of life on Titan.

"The creatures who rule Titan look less like humans than like those monsters deranged and alcoholic patients see in their dreams. For some reason—possibly because of this mysterious T-radiation—the denizens of the world have never bred true. Consequently, there is no way of foretelling what the child of any two parents may resemble . . . though one almost certain guess is that it will resemble neither parent.

"Bilateral symmetry is about the only constant human attribute to be found amongst the Titanians. That and a more or less rudimentary intelligence . . . an instinct which is more akin to animal cunning than to intellect.

"Some Titanians walk erect on their hind legs. Some crawl on all fours or squirm on their bellies. Some resemble the humanoid races of our planet, or Mars, or Venus. Others look like obscene jungle beasts, ghouls, fabulous monsters.

"I have seen Titanians whose leprous flesh covered bones have no counterpart in the human skeleton . . . others with no faces at all, as we know the meaning of the word . . . others who grope blindly along on tactile tentacles, 'seeing' with foot-long tongues, 'hearing' through their fingertips.

"Some there are who look like gigantic, crimson ants; others inch their way along the streets like hideous, mangled slugs; while yet again—astonishingly—you may chance upon a Titanian not only similar in appearance to Earthmen, but as clever and quick in thought as any terrestrial."

Grossman paused, nodding significantly. "These," he said, "are the most dangerous of all."

"And—" breathed Lynn Graham—"the nature of this danger, Mister Grossman? Attack, perhaps?"

"Attack!" The trading-post factor laughed brusquely, harshly. "A mild word for it. Extermination! The Titanians hate interlopers on their world—particularly Earthmen—with a smoldering, implacable hatred inconceivable to a civilized mind. Had they their will, they would hunt down every Earthman and slaughter him with the most horrible tortures their warped and twisted minds can devise.

"Your father, Miss Graham—" Grossman bent forward across the table to lend emphasis to his warning—"maintains a post on Titan by sufferance only. Because the natives have not the strength nor the weapons with which to rebel. But if ever the day dawns when they find such strength or weapons—" Grossman drew a deep breath and shook his head—"Then . . . Lord help all like us who dwell on Titan!"

II

*IT had arrived. It had found a birth-place. It grew. There in the lone, lorn silence, in the thawing warmth of the nourishing sands. It spawned according to its nature.*

*It made no sound save that of a thin, dry grating as its shell-like covering stirred against the sides of the pit. But a change had come upon its carapace. Its one-time stony surface now was mottled with yolky cloud; its one-time opaque walls were now translucent with a jelly-like shimmering. And from within the egg came the bruit of liquid movement. Slow, groping movement of Life that would be free. Amorphanous hands scraped and slithered at softening, yielding walls. A single flake chipped and fell away from the gigantic shell. Another followed it. Another . . . and another.*

*A native of the planet, random-roaming, chanced upon the pit. His nostrils quivered with the scent of food. With greedy stealth he moved upon his prey.*

*And then.*

*And then the native witnessed the phenomenon. Wide-eyed with wonder he beheld the monstrous sight . . . the ultimate emergence of the Thing!*

*In his dull, brutelike brain there dawned a dreadful fear. A fear . . . and a great hope! On trembling limbs he fell back from the pit, all thoughts of food forgotten, turned and scampered to the city whence he had come.*

*Meanwhile, the sprawling, raw and new-fledged Thing lay gasping in the sunlight, sucking strength from the depths of the nourishing soil. It was born. It grew. . .*

III

A STRAINED silence followed the factor's final words. A silence during which Lynn Graham's troubled gaze swept the table, searching reassurance—finding none—in the eyes of her dinner companions. A silence during which Dr. Rockingham Roswell fidgeted uneasily, removed his glasses, breathed upon them, polished them, and replaced them for the hundredth time.

It was Captain Burke who finally broke the spell. He cleared his throat and rose.

"Well, I must be getting along to the bridge. We'll be at New Boston spaceport in a matter of minutes now. I suggest that you go to your staterooms, see that your luggage is in order, and prepare to disembark."

Dr. Roswell said hesitantly, "Er . . . Captain . . . just a moment. When . . . er . . . how soon does the *Gaea* return to Earth?"

"Return to Earth! But—" Captain Burke turned a blank, uncomprehending stare upon his questioner—"but you have not yet set foot on Titan!"

Dr. Roswell shuffled uncomfortably.

"I . . . er . . . I quite realize that, Captain. But I . . . er . . . have been reconsidering. In view of Mister Grossman's revelations, I . . . er . . . am not altogether certain it would be wise to pursue my investigations. . . ."

The space skipper's broad, flat features contracted into a grimace of disdain. Despite his company's instructions to maintain at all times a respectful mien toward passengers, he permitted contempt to echo in his voice.



"You don't mean to say you are *afraid*, Doctor Roswell!"

The young man's cheeks flushed. He said, "I . . . er . . . should not put it quite that way, sir. However, I prefer not to expose myself to needless risks. The work I had intended to do on Titan is not sufficiently important to warrant—"

Grossman chuckled. The girl, Lynn Graham, looked at the embarrassed pedant almost pityingly. Captain Burke said, "I am afraid, Doctor Roswell, it will not be possible to return to Earth immediately. The *Gaea* is not returning to Earth."

"Not returning—"

"No. We are going on to Uranus to leave a cargo of food and medical supplies there. We will, however, stop back at Titan in three Solar Constant weeks. If—" The skipper's voice was openly ironic—"if you can endure the rigors of the satellite for that length of time, we will be glad to pick you up on our return trip."

"I . . . er . . . I suppose it would not be possible for me to ride with you to Uranus?"

"I'm sorry," said Burke decidedly. "The Uranus post is a military zone forbidden to civilian tourists. I cannot take you there."

"Then in that case," shrugged Roswell, "I must stay. But you *will* stop for me?"

"I'll stop for you. Meanwhile, you had better make arrangements to stay somewhere where you will be quite safe." Captain Burke's patience was quite exhausted. "Miss Graham can, perhaps, prevail upon her father to allow you to remain at the Space Patrol base."

The young doctor turned to the girl eagerly.

"Can you, Miss Graham? I would be most grateful—"

Lynn Graham nodded, her icy politeness more devastating than forthright scorn.

"Yes, Doctor Roswell, I am reasonably sure you can make such arrangements. I will ask Daddy as soon as we land. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me—"

She rose and left the dining-hall. Grossman, still chuckling, followed her example. He stopped at the doorway.

"Sorry I upset you, Roswell. But cheer up! Three weeks will pass swiftly. You'll be all right on Titan if you keep your

eye peeled and carry your Haemholtz at all times."

But his reassurance proved to be just the opposite. For the savant's lower jaw dropped; he quavered, "Haemholtz! Gracious . . . you mean I should carry a ray-pistol! Oh, mercy! I couldn't *think* of doing such a thing!"

And with a little bleat of dismay, he turned and ran toward his stateroom. The two men in the dining-hall watched him disappear. Then Grossman laughed aloud, and Captain Burke snorted.

"The younger generation! If that's the kind of men Earth is breeding nowadays, Lord help us all!"

DR. ROCKINGHAM ROSWELL pattered down the long, metal corridors of the *Gaea* to his A-deck suite. He fumbled near-sightedly at the vibro-lock and stumbled into his compartment. But once inside, the door securely bolted behind him, a change came over him. A change which would have astonished those who had a few moments before been amused at his timidity.

He removed his spectacles, casing them and thrusting them into an inside pocket. He then removed his coat. Oddly enough, rid of that closely-tailored garment, his shoulders looked considerably broader, his chest inches deeper. He drew a deep breath . . . much the same sort of breath as a sponge diver draws when he emerges from the hampering depths of the sea to the more accustomed world above and called a name.

"Bud?"

A figure appeared from the plushy wallows of a divan, waved at the young professor companionably.

"Hi, Rocky! Beginnin' to wonder when you was comin' back. We're halfway to the cradle. What's the good word?"

"The good word," grinned his informant, "is that I've paved the way. Miss Graham is going to ask her father to let us stay at the Patrol base."

"Huh?" Mulligan looked baffled. "What's good about *that*? We could've stayed at the Patrol Base anyway. All you had to do was tell Colonel Graham who you were—"

His superior officer groaned in mock despair.

"Sometimes I wonder if that cranium of yours is good for anything but a hair-garden! Don't you see, Bud, that the whole scheme depends on our being *invited* to become guests at the Patrol base? Of course, we could present our credentials, walk directly from the *Gaea* to headquarters. But it would be a cold tip-off to Grossman that we are S.I.D. men.

"As it is, he hasn't got the faintest idea that 'Doctor Rockingham Roswell' and his 'valet' are members of the Solar Investigation Department. He thinks I'm a very badly rattled pedagogue, and you're a mealy-mouthed nonentity. And that is exactly what we want him to believe—until we get the goods on him."

"Then he is our man?"

"I'm practically certain of it now. He's as nervous as a cat. Flared up the moment I questioned his reasons for living on Titan. As factor of the New Boston trading-post he is in an ideal situation to stir up trouble amongst the Titanians. And that's precisely what he has been doing. We don't know exactly why—yet!—but it's quite clear that for some reason of his own he wants all Earthmen save himself to leave Titan."

"Gold, maybe?" suggested Bud. "Oil? *Ekalastrom*?"

"No-o-o, I don't think so. The mineralogists would have detected the presence of any of those when they surveved Titan. His reason is something deeper than that—Say! Wait a minute! I wonder if it possibly—?"

"Yeah?"

"No, I'm crazy! It couldn't be that. It happened to think of that T-radiation. But I don't believe even Grossman is enough of a scientist to have discovered what it is or how it can be used—if at all. Well, anyhow—"

"Anyhow, we're in at the Base. And Grossman doesn't suspect us. That's part of the job. So—the next move?"

"We circulate. We move around and ask questions and snoop and pry and investigate."

Mulligan grinned.

"In the good old Rocky Russell tradition, eh?"

"Who?"

"Rocky Russell, I said. Don't tell me you've forgot your real name, chum?"

Rocky Russell reached into an inside pocket, brought forth a pair of thick-lensed spectacles, hooked them over his ears. His voice lifted to a high, gentle, hesitant whine.

"Oh, mercy me!" he simpered. "Forgotten my . . . er . . . real name? But, of course not! I am Doctor Rockingham Roswell. And you are my valet, Ambrose."

Bud groaned.

"Gawd! All the names in creation, and I've got to be called 'Ambrose'!"

"SO you're a doctor?" asked Colonel Graham. "That's fine. We can use another doctor on this post. Glad to have you stay with us, Doctor Roswell."

Several hours had passed since the *Gaea's* landing on Titan. In that time, much had happened. Dr. Roswell and his "man" had made their adieu to a scornful Captain Burke and a highly amused Factor Grossman, removed their baggage from the cruiser, and accompanied Lynn Graham to the S.S.P. base a few miles outside the Titanian city of New Boston.

There they had witnessed the surprise meeting of the Commandant and his daughter. Lynn Graham had rightly guessed her father's reaction upon seeing her. She had erred in only one minor detail. She had expected him to turn "pale violet" with anger. The color he *actually* achieved was somewhere in the apoplectic spectrum between dull scarlet and turkey red.

His outraged bellows, replete with invocations to the deities of a dozen worlds and highly censorable, were audible for a good half mile. But eventually—when Lynn had pointed out that: (1) she could not return to the *Gaea*; (2) she didn't want to return to the *Gaea*, and (3) that she had no intention of returning to the *Gaea* even if she could—he calmed down a trifle. And in his brusque kiss of greeting was an affection hardly in keeping with the violence of his protestations.

It was then that Lynn had introduced Dr. Roswell and his valet, explaining their desire to stay at the base. Confused and bewildered, the commandant had agreed. And now the quartet were gathered in the colonel's private quarters. The colonel, in his own crisp way, was trying to be friendly.

"A doctor," he repeated. "That's good. We need the services of a good doctor around here."

Rocky smiled feebly.

"I . . . er . . . I'm afraid you don't understand, sir. I'm not an M.D., you know. I'm an . . . er . . . D.M."

"D.M.?" repeated Graham wonderingly. "What's that?"

"A Doctor," explained Rocky, "of Mythology. It's an archeological degree, rather than a medical one. I'm what . . . er . . . might be called a research student. I gather folk tales and ancient legends, study them, analyze them, and attempt to determine their underlying meanings." He beamed happily from behind his thick-lensed glasses. "A most fascinating hobby," he said. "Oh, goodness, yes . . . most fascinating!"

Colonel Graham stared at him incredulously.

"Legends! Folk tales! But why on earth—?"

Red of face, he spluttered into silence. Lynn tried to bridge the awkward moment.

"What Daddy means, Doctor Roswell, is—why do you hunt down these ancient fables? Does your work have any practical value?"

Rocky's eyebrows arched as if the query caused him a physical pain.

"Practical value! My dear young lady, of course not! It is purely a labor of love. Knowledge for the sake of pure knowledge. Er . . . *scientia gratia scientiarum*, you know . . . that sort of thing. Of course—" He shrugged—"once in a while the research of my learned colleagues does contribute a share to the understanding of man's more mundane pursuits, but such occasions are, I hasten to assure you, quite incidental—"

Colonel Graham had recovered his composure.

"Mythology, eh? Well, what sort of legends interest you, Doctor? Fairy tales? Ghost stories?"

"Well—no," said Rocky pedantically. "The tales of greatest interest are those of fabulous monsters . . . incredible beings endowed with fantastic powers or attributes. Such may be found in the mythologies of any race or clan. Not only on Earth, but on all the planets have we heard such stories. It is our delight to

track down these tales and unearth the germ of underlying truth which created them."

"YOU mean," queried the girl, "that behind each folk tale lies a true cause or event or—or creature?"

"Exactly. For instance—well, let me see—you are familiar with the Earthly legend of the phoenix, aren't you?"

"The bird which was supposed to have had a life-span of a thousand years, at the end of which time it threw itself into a blazing pyre, from the ashes of which it was reborn?"

"That," nodded Dr. Rocky, "is the legend. Quoted as you have told it, it made no sense to Earthmen for thousands of years. Until, in fact, the year 1987 A.D., when the first Martian expedition visited the desert planet. The members of this expedition were amazed to discover a *rara avis* upon Mars impervious to extremes of both heat and cold. A bird with an astonishing life-span in excess of a thousand Earthly years. In short . . . the archetype of the fabled phoenix!"

Colonel Graham looked interested in spite of himself.

"By Gad, that's right! The *tularoo* bird. Doesn't mind heat or cold, either one. Nests in ice or red-hot coals! That's rather interesting, Doctor. Any more such examples?"

"Scores! There is the fabled unicorn . . . a one-horned gazelle-like animal certainly not indigenous to Terra, yet it found its place in the 'unnatural natural history' of not one but a dozen races. Whence originated this record of a single horned creature we could not guess . . . until we discovered such a beast on Venus.

"The fabulous 'salamander' turned out to be a common asbestos-like lizard of Mercury. Aqueous Venus solved for us the problems of the mermaid, the sea serpent and the undine. On mighty Jupiter mythologists encountered the fire-breathing saurian which gave rise to the 'dragon' myth—"

"But, Doctor Roswell!" gasped the girl, "what does this mean? That once upon a time, countless centuries ago, beasts of this sort roamed Earth? Or—?"

Rocky shook his head soberly.

"We do not know, Miss Graham. There

are a number of equally valid possibilities. One is that which you have mentioned . . . that Earth was once host to all the types of animal life now to be found on its sister planets. Another is that aeons ago Earthmen—or the intellectual rulers of one of the other planets—knew the secret of spacetravel. The factual records of places visited, strange sights seen, would in the musty passage of time become mythology.

"Still another possibility—"

"Yes?"

"Well, it is . . . er . . . a theory recently advanced by an erudite scholar, but it has elements of fantasy which make it almost incredible. You are . . . er . . . familiar with the theories of Svante Arrhenius?"

Lynn frowned. "I remember the name faintly. Didn't he claim life traveled through the ether?"

"Yes. He put forward the concept that the life-germ is universally diffused, constantly emitted from all habitable worlds in the form of spores which traverse space for years or ages, the majority being ultimately destroyed by the flame of some blazing star, but some few finding a resting-place on bodies which have reached the habitable stage.

"My colleague has carried this theory a step forward, suggesting it is not only the fundamental life-germ which thus travels . . . but also individual and distinctive life-forms! He has suggested that from each and every world in every galaxy, occasionally there set forth into the void the spores or eggs of every highly developed life-form.

"Most of these never reach their destinations. Some do. And when these do, unwilling worlds play host to beasts of nightmare mien."

#### IV

A BABBLE from the street lifted Humboldt Grossman's eyes from shrewd perusal of his ledgers. He frowned, rose to investigate the tumult, then stood stock-still in his tracks, startled as the door of his private chamber burst open.

A stunted troll with four, gnarled, dan-

gling arms—a native Titanian—served as spokesman for the excited group.

"A marvel, Master!" he jabbered. "Behold, a marvel! It was found by one of us in the sand-pits north of the city, captured and brought to you immediately. See, O Master, its height, its bulk, its strength."

He stood aside and into the room a score of tugging natives hauled a bound and helpless creature.

Bound and helpless creature?

Bound . . . yes. With yards upon yards of tightly laced metal cord which even now stretched taut over bulging sinews. Helpless . . . perhaps. It stood quietly, struggling not, but in its very quiescence Factor Grossman found a swift, disturbing menace. It was still as flood-waters are still, ere, angered, they burst with fury the puny dams constraining them. It was motionless as powerful machines are motionless before, spurred to deed, they ravage all before them.

A creature it was. But such a creature. Humanoid in form . . . male . . . but dull of eye as a brain-fogged idiot. It was seven feet tall and half as broad of shoulder, heavy of thigh and iron-strong of bicep. A Hercules, an Atlas of a man.

Grossman stared at it strangely. Then he turned to his native visitors.

"It is a marvel, yes. A great man. But what has it to do with me?"

The spokesman cringed forward hopelessly.

"It has power, O Master. You promised us vengeance and freedom when we found you one with strength to fight our cause."

Grossman's thick face mottled with disdain. "Fool!" he spat. "Do you call this creature power enough to wage a war? One halfwit giant against a well-armed garrison of humans? Take it away. This is not the power I asked for!"

The Titanian inched another step forward. "Wait, O Master!" he advised. "Wait and see what we have seen! For not yet do you understand. He is still growing!"

Grossman stared, his tiny, pig-like eyes bewildered.

"Growing? This giant—growing?"

"Yes, Master. He is as yet a babel

*This monster is less than two hours old. . . ."*

## V

THE gunner said, "This yere now four-headed animule jest sorta wriggled its fur, like, an' presto! all of a sudden it ain't no beast a-tall, but a bird! Yessirree, jest as sure as I'm tellin' the gospel truth, it turned smack into a purple bird with six green wings an' a lavender tail—"

He stopped and aimed an accurate stream of Venusian *mekel*-juice at a hapless insect. The insect floundered helplessly. So did Rocky Russell—inwardly—with his desire to laugh out loud. But he restrained himself, nodding his head sagely as he jotted a transcript of the old trooper's narrative in his little black notebook.

At his side, Lynn Graham protested, "Oh, Gunner, but *really!* I mean you must be mistaken! Animals simply don't turn into birds and fly away—"

"This un did!" swore Gunner solemnly. "Hope to drop dead in my—I mean, cross my heart! An' that ain't all the curious sights I seen in my life, neither. If the Puffessor would like to hear another little story—"

"I'm sure," said Rocky primly, "it would be most interesting. But I hate to trouble you—"

"No trouble, Puffessor. No trouble a-tall. 'Course my throat *is* gettin' a mite dry-like from talkin' so much. I might could use a sip o' water . . . or mebber a drap o' likker to sorta loosen my tongue—"

Rocky dug deep, and a coin passed between him and his informant. "Please allow me, Gunner. And many thanks. We'll have another little chat soon. I'm afraid I must be running along now, though."

Followed by his two companions, he climbed from the pill-box embrasure in which he had been interviewing the not-too-reliable old Patrolman.

TWO days had passed since "Dr. Roswell" and his aide had taken up residence in the Base. In that time, Rocky had wandered much, talked much, and learned much. Slowly he was beginning to gather that accumulation of facts which, he hoped

and believed, would ultimately bring the weight of the Law to bear on Factor Humboldt Grossman.

Exactly what Grossman's racket was, he *still* didn't know. But from various and sundry sources he had heard tales of the fat man's greed and cunning, his autocratic domination over a number of the lower-class Titanians. In his own small way, and to those rebels he had gathered about him, Humboldt Grossman was emperor of New Boston. It remained to be proven whether or not he could extend his control to embrace the whole of the satellite.

Emerging from the sunken gunnery pit, the trio found themselves upon one of the metal highways which criss-crossed the little world.

To their left lay the squat, grim rows of structures which comprised Fort Beausejour, the Solar Space Patrol base on Titan. Barracks, administration and ordnance headquarters, messhalls, dumps and depots mingled in gray heterogeneity behind a strong defense-in-depth calculated to withstand months of siege or any known form of military attack.

To their right, several miles distant at the far end of the highway, lay the city of New Boston. It was a strange city, a curious commingling of ancient and modern, savage and cultured, alien and civilized. It boasted two tremendous skyscrapers of ultramodern design constructed by Earth colonists, but about and around these, clustered like mud-daubers' nests, clung rows upon rows, thousands upon countless thousands, of tiny, dingy, one-story hovels . . . the dwellings of the natives.

It was into this city Rocky Russell's investigations now led him. He glanced at his wrist chronometer.

"Bless my soul! Very nearly time for my appointment with Factor Grossman. You are sure we can use a roller, Miss Graham?"

"Positive," answered the girl cheerfully. "I asked Daddy yesterday. You wait here; I'll get it and come back."

She moved away, giving the two S.I.D. men their first moment of privacy in hours. Bud Mulligan sighed and fumbled for a cigarette.

"So we're really gonna get to see Grossman at last? Good! How'd he sound when you audioed him for an interview?"



"Friendly enough," answered Rocky. "He said he was very busy, but he'd be glad to give me a few minutes."

"Did he know what you wanted?"

Rocky grinned a slow, lopsided grin. "Everybody on Titan knows by now," he drawled, "that there's a myth-chasing crackpot roaming loose. I'm Public Joke No. One. Which suits me just fine."

"Yeah," snorted Bud disgustedly, "but when this job's done, I'm gonna backtrack and do a little plain and fancy nose-punch-in! Like that old spacerat we talked to a few minutes ago—did you ever hear such lyin' in your life? A bird with purple wings an'—"

"Cheer up!" chuckled Rocky. "Gunner thought he was giving me the runaround, and for a generally unimaginative old codger he didn't do such a bad job of yarn spinning. He'd be surprised to learn, though, that his wild story is not half so fantastic as some of the honest tales I've heard since I began this masquerade."

Bud nodded grudgingly.

"That's true enough. An', boy, I really got to hand it to you. You talk that Doctor-o'-Mythology patter like you really *was* one. Sometimes you sound like you really believed in it yourself!"

"And the funny part of it is," said Rocky, "I almost *do!* As for talking the patter . . . well, no wonder! I studied comparative mythologies for three solid months under the best experts in the field before I undertook this job, Bud. I know more about hamadryads and demigods and winged horses than old man Bulfinch himself! Well—" He nodded significantly, and his voice lifted to the high-pitched tones of "Dr. Rockingham Roswell"—"here comes Lynn. Off we go!"

Bud shot a swift, appraising glance at him. "Oh-ho! So it's 'Lynn', now, eh?"

Fortunately, Rocky Russell did not have time to concoct an alibi for that slip of the tongue. Because the roller was drawing up beside them, Lynn was motioning them in. And in a few minutes they were on their way to New Boston.

"YOU understand," said Factor Grossman, "I have never *seen* this creature myself, Dr. Roswell. I am merely repeating the description given me by some of my friends."

Rocky nodded, busily jotting in his ubiquitous black notebook the facts just told him by the fat man. "A furry animal," he repeated, "with the netherparts of a horse and the torso of a human. Two curly black horns . . . cloven hoofs . . . is occasionally glimpsed in damp, woodland dells . . . excellent!"

He looked up, smiling. "Very interesting, sir. You have perhaps already noted the similarity between this . . . er . . . thing and the 'Centaur' of Greek mythology? Amazing, isn't it, that we should find the same . . . er . . . legendary monster on two worlds separated by so many millions of miles? Well, we must organize an expedition to search for this creature. Now, have you any other fables to add to my little collection?"

He poised his pencil expectantly, his eyes vaguely eager and excited.

"We-e-ell, let me see—" Grossman stroked a sleek, fleshy jaw—"I heard one the other day about—Yes? What is it, Grushl?"

A Titanian had pressed open the door of the factor's private office. He glanced at the guests nervously.

"If you please, sir—the Thing-that-Grows! It has broken its—"

"*That will do!*" Grossman's voice crackled like the snap of a bulldozer's whip. He rose hastily, bowed apology to his visitors. "If you will excuse me a moment—"

He strode to the door, propelled his underling out of sight and hearing. The three guests stared after him in astonishment.

"Well!" exclaimed Lynn Graham. "Whatever came over him so quickly? Why, he turned positively pale!"

"You're telling me?" grunted Bud. "He looked like he seen his grandmother's ghost . . . or his own. What did that guy say? 'Thing-that-Grows'? What would *that* be? And what would it break?"

"Shhh!" warned Rocky. "He's coming back . . . Ah, there Factor! Everything all right?"

GROSSMAN had been gone but a few seconds, but in that time a change had come over him. His eyes were dark with . . . Rocky could not tell just what. Excitement? Or fear? A thin film of perspiration overspread his cheeks, his forehead, his upper lip. He tried to put re-

assurance into his voice, but the effort didn't quite jell.

"Quite all right, Doctor. A little trouble with . . . with a small horticultural experiment we are conducting. But I'm afraid I must ask you to leave now. I have work to do."

Rocky said, "If I . . . er . . . can be of any help—?"

"No. Thank you very much, but this is work of an . . . er . . . experimental nature. Company business, you know." The Factor bustled them to the door. "We will meet again. Good afternoon."

And almost before they had stammered their confused farewells, he had waved to them and lumbered off.

"Well!" said Lynn. "I must say that's the quickest brush-off I ever got . . . if not the smoothest."

"Horticultural experiment," mused Rocky. "Mmm-hmmm! It's possible, of course, but . . . I wonder. Bud . . . er . . . I mean, Ambrose—"

"Yeah?" said Ambrose.

"I think I'll stay here in New Boston for a few more hours. I'd like to . . . er . . . study the native quarters. Perhaps you would be kind enough to escort Miss Graham back to the Fort?"

"Certainly," nodded Bud. "A pleasure. But—"

Lynn Graham had been staring from one to the other of the two men querulously. Now she declared herself. "Oh, no!" she stated flatly. "You don't get rid of *me* so easily as all that. Doctor Roswell—just what's going on here?"

Rocky fumbled for his glasses.

"Er . . . going on, Miss Graham? I don't understand—"

"Neither do I—which is just why I'm asking. First Grossman goes into a mild panic; now you two are acting like the masked strangers in Act Two. Not to mention the fact—" the girl pointed out shrewdly—"that for a few minutes you quite forgot to talk like a college professor . . . and addressed your alleged 'valet' as 'Bud'—"

Rocky did remove his glasses. But this time he did not breathe on them, wipe them, and replace them as was the habit of "Dr. Roswell." Instead, he shoved them out of sight, and grinned at the girl. When he spoke it was in his natural voice.

"All right, Miss Lynn," he said, "you

win. I pulled a boner. Now I might as well come clean. I am not Doctor Rockingham Roswell at all. My name is Russell . . . Rocky Russell . . . and I'm here on Titan to—"

But not at that moment did he tell Lynn Graham who he was, and his purpose on the satellite. For suddenly he paused in midsentence, his jaw dropping open, and his eyes widening to match.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Look . . . look at *that!*"

The others, too, had turned to determine the origin of the rumbling sound. Now they saw it. A tremendous motor-roller trundling down the main thoroughfare of New Boston. A heavy roller bearing a ponderous burden . . . a single, gigantic item. The appearance and purpose of this item was unmistakable, but its size . . .

"Manacles!" croaked Bud. "But . . . but who ever heard of manacles that size! *That Thing is twenty feet in circumference!*"

## VI

HUMBOLDT GROSSMAN entered the cavern cautiously. It was dark in there, but not altogether dark. The ever-present luminescence of the chamber walls lent an eerie glow by which could be seen the giant figure huddled at the far end. There had been bonds upon the wrists and ankles of this figure, but now the frayed ends of snapped hawsers dangled loosely as the creature pawed fretfully at adamant walls and ceiling.

At sight of the monster, Grossman faltered, stunned. To the Titanian behind him he choked hoarsely, "He—he still grows!"

"Yes, Master. Already he must crouch to avoid being crushed by the cavern's roof. Each hour he grows faster. In a day . . . half a day . . . perhaps less . . . he will die in here if we do not let him out."

Grossman smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

"Have no fear. Before that time, he will be outside—under my control!" He stepped forward into the cave. The creature's eyes turned questioningly toward this tiny mote of life which dared approach him thus, stretched forth a hand to crush the annoy-

ing insect. But from a curiously-shapen tube in the insect's claw leaped a lancet of flame. A gout of red agony that scorched and blistered his palm. The giant howled and pulled his hand away. Grossman smiled. Good! Who holds an adversary in fear of pain possesses a slave. Now, if only the creature were telepathic—"You!" he thought, his thought directed and intensified by the menavisa unit in his helmet, "have you intelligence? Can you understand me?"

The giant's answer came back sluggishly. "I can . . . understand."

"That is well. Then listen to me, and mark well my words. I am Master here. Do you acknowledge that?"

The creature stirred restlessly. "Master? I accept no Master. I am Master of mine own will."

Grossman pressed the grip of his Haemholtz. A flash of livid lightning seared the subterranean chamber. Grossman challenged, "You defy the Master of the fire-that-bites?"

The giant cringed against the farthest wall. "Nay!" he conceded. "You are Master. I am your servant."

"It is well you understand. For there is work to be done. When it is accomplished, then you will be freed. Hear now, huge one, what is expected of you . . ."

## VII

"MANACLES!" repeated Rocky Russell, "Manacles twenty feet in circumference! But that—that's impossible! Handcuffs for a normal six-foot man measure about six inches in circumference. Twenty foot manacles would be used on someone *two hundred and forty feet tall!*"

"Always assuming of course," Lynn pointed out, "that these gyves are to be used on a *man*. Which isn't very likely. Much more possible that they were constructed for some beast . . . some tremendous animal—"

"True," admitted Rocky. "But even so—imagine the size of that animal! Well, that settles it. Bud, I want you to take Miss Graham back to the fort immediately."

"And you?"

"I'm going to follow that roller."

"But there may be danger—"

"There undoubtedly is danger," replied

Rocky grimly, "directed at the Patrol . . . perhaps the whole of Titan. Those manacles are somehow associated with Grossman's secret. I've got to learn how. You can help best by racing back to Beausejour and warning Colonel Graham to be on guard against any eventuality. Keep your portable vocoder tuned to our private wavelength. If and when I learn anything important I'll send it on to you. O.Q.?"

Bud shrugged helplessly.

"You're the boss. But I'd rather stay here with you and—"

"Get going! Oh—when you reach the Base, take off the lid. Tell Colonel Graham who we are."

"And if it's not too much trouble," interrupted Lynn Graham, "would you mind telling me *now?*"

Rocky grinned at her, for the last time using Dr. Roswell's high whine, "Oh, mercy, Miss Graham, you mustn't be impatient. Ambrose will tell you as you ride."

"Ambrose!" fumed Bud. "Ambrose be damned—!" But he was talking to empty space. Rocky had already disappeared down the avenue after the gyve-laden roller.

Fortunately the roller, groaning under its ponderous burden, was not moving very fast. Rocky, though on foot, was able to keep it within sight without too obviously appearing to be following it. In the character of Dr. Rockingham Roswell, already known and amusing to the Titanians, he dawdled through the city five hundred yards or so in the wake of the burdened vehicle.

Through business streets he followed it, where eyes turned to follow its passage and furtive Titanians whispered to each other behind concealing palms, and—as the squalid little shops thinned out—into the suburban residential districts . . . finally quite out of the city proper.

Out here it was practically impossible to follow the truck without being noticed. Once the city's artificial foliage was left behind, the landscape of Titan's countryside stretched stark and severe so far as the eye could see . . . its drab, sandy monotony broken only by an occasional dune, its dull sameness embellished only by the silvery span of roadbed upon which humans must travel to live on Titan.

By dropping far behind the roller, Rocky was able to keep it in sight for a little while longer. But then his efforts came suddenly

to naught as the driver of the truck—a Tiitanian—swerved completely off the lead highway and began rolling across the barren desert toward a hummock outlined on the horizon some miles distant.

LACKING a bulger, Rocky was stopped cold. No way to follow, now. But he waited and watched a while longer to assure himself that the swollen rise of ground *was* the roller's destination, then strolled back into New Boston.

Here he sought the privacy of a 'fresher, and called Bud on the vocoder. Mulligan answered immediately.

"Yeah, Rocky? Everything all right?"

"Everything's all *wrong*! The con-founded roller left the highway and plowed across the gray-and-nasty. Having no desire to be cooked into frizzled beef, I gave up the chase."

"That's tough, Chief. What do we do now?"

"I," said Rocky, "stay right here. You load a couple of bulgers in a roller and come charging back here as fast as you can. I *still* want to find out what Grossman's hiding in those hills that needs to be tied up with twenty-foot bands of forged steel."

"O.Q." said Bud. "Sit tight. I'll pick you up in three shakes."

"Make it two!"

"One," chuckled Bud. "I'm practically on my way now."

He was as good as his word. Rocky had only finished one cigarette when a blue S.S.P. roller came tearing up the highway from Fort Beausejour. Bud jumped out, bulger-clad and carrying a second protective suit for his comrade.

"Here you are, pal. Where do we go from here?"

"Out of town on the east highway. I'll show you. A hill rising out of—Hey, wait a minute! Who's driving this crate?"

Bud looked embarrassed.

"Oh—she is!"

"She?"

"Miss Graham. She—"

"—refused," chimed in Lynn Graham, "to be left out of it. Indeed I did. Captain Russell, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, deceiving us the way you did. When the Sergeant, here, told me who you *really* were, and what you were doing here, I almost *died* with excitement! And

to think that you, a Captain in the S.I.D., pretended to be a mythologist! It's the funniest thing—"

"Miss Graham," interrupted Rocky impatiently, "there is nothing at all amusing about the job we are engaged in. It is, moreover, no work in which a girl should be involved. You would oblige me by returning to the Fort on the first transport bus—"

"Oh, no! This is a Patrol roller, and I requisitioned it in my own name. Either I drive it or—" Stubbornly—"or it doesn't roll!"

"Very well, then. You may take us as far as the desert path. But there we leave you. And now, let's get going. We have wasted enough time as it is."

Rocky motioned Bud into the roller. A few seconds later they were speeding noiselessly out on the highway toward the spot where Rocky had seen the truck leave the road.

RUSSELL had been keeping an eye on his chronometer for the past little while, estimating the number of daylight minutes left to him. On this little satellite there was no such thing as dusk or twilight. At ninety million miles from Sol, there was little enough sunlight. Titan's main radiance came not from the Sun, but from its own parent planet which, a huge, shining platter in the sky, gathered up and reflected to its tiny satellite the thin illumination from afar . . . for all the world like a gigantic, reflecting mirror.

Titan revolved on its axis in fifteen hours, twenty-three minutes. Almost the whole of its day period had elapsed now. Shortly . . .

Yes, even as he studied out the problem, night came suddenly and completely to this part of Titan. It descended instantaneously, snuffing out the light as a finger presses the wick of a candle. Only the stars remained, glowing white in the rich, jet vastness of outer space.

The girl reached toward the dashboard instinctively, but Rocky's hand clasped about her wrist.

"No! Don't!"

"But—but I was only going to turn on the lights."

"I know. But you mustn't. We're get-

ting very close to the spot now. Can you see to drive without them?"

"Why, I—I guess so," said Lynn dubiously. She was surprised, herself, to learn that she could. "Why, yes! The road stands out like a dark ribbon against the sands on either side. Isn't that strange?"

"Not so strange at that," grunted Rocky. "I'm beginning to get an idea about the mysterious T-radiation of this planet. I may be completely wrong, of course, but so far my theory fits all the facts I've observed. There's something I would like to know, though. Grossman told us the soil killed humans. I wonder *how* they die?"

"I can answer that. Daddy told me the first day I was here. He was warning me against ever leaving the shielded areas . . . the Fort, the city, the roads. He said that if they wander onto the soil of Titan without protection, humans just shrivel up and crumble into dust like—like mummies!"

"Like mummies, eh!" grunted Rocky. He sounded quite well satisfied. "Mmm-hmm! Then *that* fits, too. Yes, I think I'm beginning to understand a lot of things . . . including the reason Factor Grossman would like to rid this little world of all competitors—"

"Well, don't keep secrets!" snapped Bud. "We'd like to know, too. What's it all about?"

"No time now. There's the hill out yonder. Pull up here, Miss Lynn. Here's where we leave you."

Lynn stopped the roller obediently. But as Bud and Rocky climbed out she asked, "What do you want me to do now? Can't I come with you?"

"No. You turn the roller around and wait here. We have no idea what we're going to buck up against. We may have to retreat—suddenly. If so, I'll fire three blasts on my Haemholtz. Two short, one long. If you see that signal, get ready to start moving. We'll come on the double-quick. But if we're being pursued too closely to make it—"

"Yes?"

"Then don't wait for us!" ordered Rocky.

"Head for the Base and bring the Patrolmen. Understand?"

"All but one thing," complained the girl. "Why not send for a platoon of Patrolmen right now? Why wait until it is too late?"

"Because," explained Rocky patiently, "despite our suspicions, we have as yet no actual *proof* that the factor is involved in anything shady. The Patrol is an organization sworn to maintain the Law, not to violate it, riding roughshod over the rights and privileges of citizens.

"When we are certain—as I fully expect we shall be shortly—that Grossman is implicated in some illegal scheme *then* we can call in the Patrol. But until that time—"

"Until that time," broke in an oily, taunting voice, you will play the part of quixotic fools, eh, my dear Doctor? But has it never occurred to you that by the time you get the proof you want . . . it may be too late to summon help?"

Rocky whirled, as did his two companions. From the side of the road, where they had lain in dark concealment behind a low escarpment, rose a circle of shadowy figures. The largest of these, a heavy man looming even greater in his protective bulger, approached them. In his left hand he held a flash; its rays glinted upon still another instrument in his right hand . . . the tube of a Haemholtz burner held steadily upon them. All recognized the newcomer's voice at once.

"Grossman!"

## VIII

IN the gloom, Grossman's features could not be seen behind the quartzite view-pane of his bulger, but by the thick satisfaction in his voice, Rocky could guess the complacent smirk lingering on his over-red lips.

"Yes, my friends," he acknowledged, "Grossman. This is somewhat of a reversal, no? The one you came to apprehend has captured you. My dear Doctor Roswell, did you consider me a perfect fool? Did you not know the driver of my roller would report to me that you had followed him to this spot?"

Rocky said levelly, "Not 'Doctor Roswell,' Grossman. My name is Russell. Captain Russell of the S.I.D. And it is my duty to advise you that you stand self-convicted of armed assault upon the persons of legal officers engaged in the performance of their duties. Anything you say may later be used against you."

Grossman laughed.



"My soul, Captain, you *are* a cool one! Not the same man at all as the learned doctor who was afraid of firearms! It is too bad you have blundered into this situation. I rather admire your effrontery. We could have been friends, I think."

"The question," said Rocky dryly, "is open to argument."

Lynn Graham bridled, "This is all very high-handed, Mister Grossman, and very mysterious. What is all this talk of 'capturing' someone? What do you intend to do with us?"

Grossman said soothingly, "Have no fear, Miss Graham, you will come to no harm. But I fear that for the present I shall be compelled to take you into—well, shall we call it, 'protective custody'? You see, I have—ah—*certain plans*. It would not do for these plans to be overthrown at the final moment. Therefore, I must request you to be my guests until I have succeeded in gaining my objective—"

"Which is," interrupted Rocky harshly, "complete control of Titan?"

"Exactly, Captain Russell."

"And its wealth."

"And its—" Grossman stopped abruptly, the tone of his voice altering. "Ah! Then you know?"

"Enough," said Russell. "Enough to warn you, Grossman, that it won't work. This isn't the first time, you know, that an individual has tried to discard interplanetary law and seize control of some rich plum. The penal colonies are full of ambitious men like yourself who thought they could defy the Space Control. But it won't work, Grossman. No man, or group of men, wields sufficient power to defeat the forces of justice and order—"

Grossman chuckled again, this time delightedly.

"You know a little, Captain—yes. But not enough! Titan will be mine—and soon!—because I have found an ally powerful enough to win me my demands. You doubt? Very well, you shall see for yourself. Come!"

He spun to his little coterie of followers, snapped commands in the strange, guttural tongue of Titan. The oddly assorted creatures, some humanoid in form, some frighteningly animalistic, formed a rough guard about Rocky and Bud. Grossman hesitated before Lynn.

"You have no protective suit? That is unfortunate. It would, of course, be fatal for you to accompany us across the sands without one. Yet I cannot permit you to go free—Grushl!"

"Yes, Master?"

"Take the girl to my office building in the city and keep her there until I come. She must not escape, nor may she communicate with any other humans. You understand?"

"Yes, Master."

"Very well. Take her away. And now, gentlemen, if you are quite ready—Forward, march!"

The Titanians behind Bud and Rocky prodded. Helpless in the face of vastly superior odds, the two S.I.D. men stumbled forward off the highway and across the rough desert, toward the hill dully gleaming a short distance away.

SEATED at the controls of the tiny roller, Lynn Graham was thinking furiously as she drove. Obviously there was no chance of escaping so long as that flabby-fleshed parody of manhood crouched behind her with a Haemholtz leveled on the small of her back. Yet somehow she must get away . . . get to the Fort and bring the Patrol . . .

Guile, that was her only chance. Take advantage of the slow-thinking Titanian's inferior mentality. She turned and smiled back over her shoulder.

"Have you ever been to the Patrol Base before?" she asked pleasantly.

Grushl answered mechanically, "Yes. Many times—" Then the implication of her words penetrated his brute brain. "Before? But we are not going to the Patrol Base."

"Maybe," retorted Lynn airily, "*you're* not, but *I* am. Just as fast as this roller will carry me."

Grushl's heavy brows gathered in perplexity.

"But, no! You are to drive to the office building, there await the Master."

Lynn laughed. "What nonsense! So long as I am the driver of this roller, I will take it where I wish."

"Then," said Grushl thoughtfully, "I will be forced to shoot you. You must not escape."

"But you can't do that," Lynn pointed

out shrewdly. "Factor Grossman said nothing about shooting me. He ordered that I was to be kept safely until he came."

"Yes," pondered the Titanian, "that is true. But I see no other way to—"

"I am afraid you will have to let me drive to Fort Beausejour. So long as I am driving, there is nothing you can do to prevent me taking the roller where I wish."

Grushl, who had been wrestling laboriously with the problem, now suddenly saw the light. His deepset eyes brightened. "Oh, no! There is another way!" he cried triumphantly. "I will drive the roller!"

"B-but—" cried Lynn.

"That is the solution. Stop the roller. You and I will change places. I will drive; you will move back here."

Obediently, Lynn drew the car to a halt, slipped from the driver's cubicle as the Titanian moved from the rear seat to take her place. Grushl smiled at her complacently. "You see?" he boasted. "It is really very simple. Now I can stop the roller wherever I wish. The Master will be obeyed." He reached for the controls laying his Haemholtz on the cushion beside him as he did so. That was what Lynn had been waiting for. In one sudden motion she leaned forward, scooped up the weapon.

"Sorry, Grushl!" she cried. "But it's you or me—"

She slashed the tube down hard upon the Titanian's scalp. Grushl groaned once, heavily—and sagged. His hands, falling away, dragged at the steering control-stick. In an instant the car jerked into convulsive motion, charged toward the edge of the road.

Lynn screamed and tugged at the door beside her. In a moment more she would have been carried out across the deadly sands without a shield of any sort. But just as the roller left the road, the girl threw herself through the door . . . fell sprawling on the edge of the roadbed.

The roller bounced out fifty . . . a hundred . . . two hundred yards into the desert-land . . . then stalled. It lay there, a dark form dimly outlined against the thin iridescence of the soil, a silent vehicle bearing a single, unconscious occupant.

Lynn Graham stared at it dolefully for a few moments. Then, because there was no use crying over spilt milk—or lost means

of transportation—she turned and hurried toward the city as quickly as possible . . . afoot.

AS they approached the hill in the darkness, the two S.I.D. men were aware of much activity going on around them. They heard the cries of foremen, the grunts of laborers, the chuff-chuff of old-fashioned combustion engines, and the high, shrill whining of a single highpowered atomotor.

Rocky glanced at the New Boston factor inquisitively.

"Mining, Grossman—already?"

Grossman chuckled.

"Mining, yes. But not for what you think. Before we mine for wealth, we must mine for power."

"Mine for power?"

"You shall see in a moment what I mean." Grossman motioned one of his native aides to him. "Ho, there! He is secure? The mighty one is shackled as I commanded?"

"Yes, O Master. He is bound wrist and ankle."

"Good! And the excavation?"

"Proceeds on schedule, Master. By dawn it should be finished."

"That is well. For if he still grows—"

"He does, O Master!"

"—dawn will be none too soon. The cavern will no longer hold him."

Bud whispered to his friend and superior, "Say, what goes on here? What are they talking about?"

"If I'm not greatly mistaken," answered Rocky, "the thing for which those manacles were made."

Verification of his guess came almost immediately. Again their guards prodded them forward, and behind Grossman they entered a passageway dipping into the side of the hill. Through an ancient tunnel, damp and malodorous, they marched, debouching finally into a gigantic cavern . . . a huge bubble of emptiness blown into the solid rock in some forgotten geologic age of change.

And there at last before them stood . . .

No . . . it did not stand. There was no longer room for it to stand upright in an underground cavern whose roof was but three hundred feet high. It crouched. It knelt upon all fours like a great, mute beast; knelt and stared with dumbly ques-

tioning eyes at the tiny motes now entering its lair to look upon it.

It had been secured, as the Titanian had said, with great metal manacles, from the welded joints of which stretched mighty chains so huge that a man might walk upright through a single loop. Its wrists were also gyved, and a length of chain swung between the two.

But it made no effort to fight these bonds. It just crouched there in the strange semi-gloom, watching with pale-gleaming eyes the movements of its self-proclaimed Master.

Subconsciously Rocky Russell had been expecting just some such revelation as this. Even so, it was one case where realization of an idea far surpassed speculation. A gasp of sheer astonishment wrenched itself from his lips; he stared at the giant with shocked incredulity.

"Colossus!" he choked. "Lord—the Colossus himself, come to life! Grossman, where did you find this—?"

Grossman smiled urbanely.

"Not a bad name for him, Captain. Your brief period of masquerade as a mythologist apparently left some impression on you. Colossus—yes! But this time no brainless monster of brass. A living creature, intelligent and obedient to my commands. You, there!" He turned and addressed his slave, again utilizing the menavival unit. "You know your orders? You know what must be done?"

THE creature had telepathic power commensurate with its bulk. The mental answer came rolling into the brains of the Earthenmen with almost audible force.

"I know my orders. I know what must be done."

"And who is Master? Whose will must be obeyed?"

This, thought Rocky with swift distaste, was sheer braggadocio, and typical of Grossman. It was not necessary to bludgeon a servile answer out of the gigantic captive. He had already proven his point.

But if the question had been intended to elicit a humble deference, it failed in its purpose. For the Colossus did not answer. Instead, it continued to stare down at its accoster mutely, speculatively. Almost, thought Rocky, defiantly.

"Well?" repeated Grossman. "Who is Master here?"

And this time, whipping a tube from his holster, he accompanied the question with a rapier-like lash of fire that swept across the Colossus' hurriedly upraised palm. For at sight of the gun, at the crackle of the heat-beam, the giant had begun to stammer a hasty answer—

"You, O Master! You are Master! You—"

And then, as suddenly as it had begun—it stopped! And over its features spread a strange, strained look. What that expression meant, Rocky could not guess. It seemed to mirror surprise. Vast, pleased surprise. The giant lifted the palm across which Grossman's ray had swept and studied it with sluggish interest. It drew a finger of its other hand across what should be a badly burned piece of flesh . . . and began smiling. It was an evil smile. There was no mirth in it. Just grim, savage exultation. And determination!

Then deliberately it reached forward—and attempted to grasp Grossman!

This time it was the Factor who fell back hurriedly. A cry burst from his lips, he pointed the Haemholtz at the giant and coldly, murderously, turned its ray to the maximum concentration. The air of the confined quarters seethed and crackled with blistering heat as the livid flame blasted its way to its target.

But the Colossus . . . *laughed!*

It was the first time human ears had ever heard a sound from that inhuman throat. Nor did those who heard it ever want to hear it again. From those great, gaping lips towering yards above them peeled a deep-pitched torrent like the simultaneous rolling of a thousand summer thunders. It was a sound to batter, blast and deafen the eardrums. Were it not for the bulgers in which they were clad, the Earthen would in that moment have been stricken with instantaneous deafness. As it was, Rocky's ears rang fearsomely with the vibrations of the Colossus' laughter, muted, as the sound was, through his helmet diaphragm.

And Grossman's flame . . . meant nothing. The Colossus ignored it as if it were a dancing sunbeam briefly flickering across his flesh. Again he stretched forth an avid, clutching hand . . .

Grossman screamed aloud in panic fear

... and ran! Into the narrow tunnel he darted, where that mighty hand could not follow and close about him. Through the tunnel, out and up from the depths of the underground cavern. Behind him ran the unguarded duo he had called his captives.

At the mouth of the tunnel, attracted by the tumult, were gathered a knot of Titanians. To these Grossman panted swift commands.

"The mouth of the tunnel . . . close and block it immediately. The Colossus has gone mad. And the excavation, stop working on it!"

"But, Master . . . it is almost finished!"

"All the worse! Fill it in again. He must not break free. He will destroy us all!" Grossman turned to Rocky and pawed at him beseechingly. "Russell, call the Base! Tell the Colonel to send men here . . . guns! This creature—"

RUSSELL said sternly, "Rather sudden change of heart, Grossman. A few short minutes ago the Colossus was your ally, the aide through whose efforts you were going to force the Patrol off Titan and gain sole possession for yourself."

"That doesn't matter now. I was ambitious . . . yes. I had dreams of being a king, an emperor. You know why, Russell. You are a clever man. You guessed the reason for the T-radiation. But I did not dream, when the egg was hatched two days ago, that its occupant would continue to grow . . . and *grow* . . . and GROW!" Grossman's voice rose hysterically. "It is a madness from space, come to kill us all. I thought at first I could use It, bend It to my will. It was afraid of flame. But now It has grown too large, Its flesh too thick, to mind such puny weapons. It is strong, Russell . . . inconceivably strong. It is practically invulnerable—"

Bud said, "But what you're doing ought to hold it in check. If you bury it alive . . . don't feed it . . ."

"Feed it!" Grossman laughed mirthlessly. "It doesn't *need* feeding! Don't you understand . . . it has never been fed a mouthful in its life!"

"Never been—!" Rocky stared at the shaking Factor. "But—but do you realize what that means? It does not eat—yet it continues to grow. From *somewhere* it

must be deriving the nourishment to gorge its cells. From somewhere—"

"Rocky!" Bud's voice interrupted him suddenly. It was a voice cracked with terror and strain. "Rocky—quick! We've got to get out of here! Look! The earth! Quaking—"

His warning was superfluous. All present had experienced the trembling at the same time, a violent, insistent rocking of the soil beneath their feet. Now gaunt Titanians, panic-stricken, were fleeing in all directions. Grossman had stumbled and fallen to his knees. Rocky bent over him, lifted him by main force and howled into his ear,

"A roller, Grossman! You must have a private roller somewhere around here! Where is it?"

"O-over there!" The Factor pointed uncertainly at a gray bulk dim in the gloom.

"Then come on!" snapped Rocky. "We've got to get to New Boston!"

"N-new Boston? The city? But—but why? We want to get to the Patrol Base—"

"New Boston," Rocky grated, "first. That's where you sent Lynn Graham—remember? Gad! I didn't think he could do it! But he is! Start this roller, Grossman, and let's get out of here—quick! Look! The Colossus—"

THE others stared, and a little whimper escaped Grossman's slack lips as he saw the final act of the drama which had begun with the trembling of the earth beneath them.

The thin iridescence of the hillside was seamed and cracked with a myriad of tiny black veins. The whole hummock quivered and trembled as though stricken with some petrologic ague. And then, suddenly, with a crash like that of rolling doom, the whole crown of the hill seemed to erupt explosively before them. Gigantic boulders ripped loose from ancient bedrock and raced wildly down tattered slopes. A myriad tiny fragments burst skyward, sifted down as a hail of deadly debris. There came the rending, tearing, grating sound of stone grinding against stone . . . cacophonous background for the cries of maddened Titanians, the screech of roller motors roaring into action, the moans of injured and dying natives. Then—

Then Colossus burst from the womb of the hampering earth! Rose to stand upright in the prison he had outgrown. He shook himself, and detritus scattered about the terrified watchers. He raised a great palm, and with demoniac deliberation brought it squarely down upon a tiny band of huddled and terrified natives. When he lifted his palm again . . . it dripped redly!

Rocky thrust the fumbling Grossman from the controls. "Move over! Let me at the stick—"

In a flash he had started the roller's motor, sent the speedster tearing headlong and recklessly across the broken desert flooring. Not a moment too soon. For the Colossus, having once shed blood, now swung into a literal orgy of savage destruction. Like a huge, brainless automaton he flailed the hillside about him clean of every moving thing . . . beating with gigantic, steel-hard fists at anything and everything he saw, until that thing lay like a flattened pulp upon the ground.

And all the while horrendous laughter peeled incessantly from his contorted lips. Laughter which carried to New Boston, miles away; even to the Patrol Base beyond the city. Laughter which struck terror into the hearts of listeners who did not know as yet—happily!—whence it came, or the awful fate which lay in store for them.

For Colossus wearied, now, of lingering in his pit. He placed a palm on either side of the chasm he had opened for his escape, and vaulted easily to the surface. The enormous manacles with which his captors had hoped to hold him dangled uselessly. The ground shuddered beneath him. Where his feet met earth they forced depressions. Colossus was drawing sustenance, now, at ever-increasing speed from the soil which fed his odd, unnatural appetite. Already he was taller than New Boston's highest building. More than a quarter mile he towered into the air. And still he grew . . .

## IX.

L YNN Graham, plodding at long and weary last into the outskirts of the city, wondered again—with the vague, dull incuriosity which was the only emotion of which her exhausted brain was capable—what had been the meaning of those sounds

she had heard from the desert wastes behind her a few hours ago.

It was all very mysterious . . . mysterious and alarming. First had come the wails. Not wails, really, but dreadful, ear-splitting howls like the bellowing of some monstrous beast. Then out of the darkness behind her had come hurtling a small roller. A madly ricocheting vehicle without lights. She had attempted to signal the driver . . . but in vain. As well try to hitch a ride on a runaway comet as on that speeding car.

And now? Now she was entering a city which ought to be asleep, but, instead, was seething with furious activity. Lights shone from the windows of buildings, shacks, stores. Crowds congregated at corners, huddled groups of frightened figures that looked astonishingly like mobs of refugees.

It was as though a mass-panic had seized the entire city. Earthmen gathered their families fearfully about them; Titanians scurried, slithered, hobbled in every direction in helter-skelter confusion. Vainly Lynn accosted passers-by in search of an explanation. Her queries were met with terror-numbered stares, with mumbles, with incomprehensible mouthings.

*"We heard . . . Danger approaching . . . Someone said . . . Must leave the city . . . They told us . . . Giant beast . . . Death . . ."*

Despairing of ever learning the truth from such informants, Lynn fought her way to a public audio booth. After a longer-than-usual wait, her call was put through. Over the selenoplate she stared into the worried eyes of her father.

A prayer of relief and gratitude escaped the Colonel as he recognized his caller.

"Lynn! Thank the Lord you're safe! I've been worried sick about you. And so has that young doctor—"

"Rocky? You mean he and Bud escaped? They're with you at the base?"

"Roswell—I mean *Russell*—is. Mulligan has gone out with the Fleet on scout patrol."

"F-fleet?" stammered Lynn. "Scout patrol? Daddy—what is this all about? I seem to be the only person on this world who doesn't know what's wrong—"

A VOICE at the other end of the wire said politely, "May I, sir?"—and Colonel Graham's face faded back to be replaced by the grave, sharp-lined fea-



tures of the young S.I.D. captain. "Lynn—" he began, and even in that tense moment Lynn Graham found time to wonder that he had dropped all pretense of formality—"Lynn, we are all in the gravest peril. Colossus has broken loose!"

"Co-colossus?"

"The *Thing* for which those manacles were forged. It turned out to be a giant humanoid. Bud and I saw it. It was more than a thousand feet tall when it escaped Grossman. Now it has more than doubled that height!"

Lynn gasped.

"But—but where is it?"

"After it broke from its underground cell it headed west. For almost seven hours it has been roaming the planet wildly and at will. It completely destroyed the mining-town of Hawesbury and the villages of Placer and Dry Ditch."

"But aren't we doing anything to stop it? It must be destroyed—"

"Three flights are out looking for it. Two haven't been able to contact it at all . . . the third is unreported. We fear that flight . . . found it!" Russell's voice was more sober than ever. "Lynn . . . our weapons seem to be useless against it. Its skin is incredibly tough, hard, resistant. Heat does not bother it, and our heaviest HE shells are like pebbles upon a hippo's hide."

"But there must be *some* way—"

"There has *got* to be some way," nodded Russell, "for if we don't find it . . . and soon . . . Titan will be a dead world, peopled by a single, monstrous entity. Now—" He abandoned explanations for a more immediate problem—"you stand tight. I'm coming to New Boston to get you."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I'll hire a transport."

"There's no such thing. The road between here and the city is and has been thronged with refugees for hours. I don't believe there's a commercial roller left in the city. Because, you see—"

"Yes?" pressed Lynn as he hesitated.

"Never mind. I'll be right there for you."

"You were going to tell me something, Rocky. What?"

"Well," said Rocky reluctantly, "I guess you'd better know. According to the seismograph, Colossus has almost completed

his circumambulation of Titan . . . and is on his way back toward New Boston. You must be very, very careful. And now, good-bye! See you later!"

The circuit faded, and he was gone. Lynn stood for a moment thinking swiftly. Then she decided. Better to *do* something than to just sit waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . in a city gone mad with fear. She would start toward the Base *now*, meet Rocky on the way.

Having made her decision, she turned quickly and took her place in the jostling throng pressing southward . . .

ROCKY, moving north on the New Boston safeway, as he wormed his roller through the ever-thickening mass of panicky Titanians and terrified Earth colonists rushing to the safety of the Base was once again—for perhaps the hundredth time—trying to grasp that elusive half-thought which had lurked in the back of his brain ever since Colossus had broken free.

Something Grossman had said—Grossman who now cowered in a Patrol cell, far from the haughty, autocratic figure he had pretended to be—had brushed a spark in Rocky's mind. But now that spark had dulled, and Rocky could not recapture it. It had something to do with Colossus . . . it suggested some means of combating . . .

"*Damnation!*"

The hordes of refugees had been parting like a flesh sea before him ever since he left the Fort gates. But now the numbers were becoming so great that he could not move the roller through them except at a crawl. He realized this, and gave up the unequal struggle. He called an Earthman to him.

"Here, you—can you drive a roller?"

"Yes, indeed, sir!"

"Then take this back to Colonel Graham at the Fort. Tell him Captain Russell is going ahead on foot."

The colonist stared at him strikingly. "You—do you mean you're going back toward the city, sir? But you can't do that! It—it's suicide. They say a huge monster, ten miles tall, is coming to smash the city to pieces—"

Rocky said tightly, "Never mind that now. You give my message to the Commandant—*understand?*" And he climbed

from the car and forced his way against the tide, northward on foot.

It was as he was pressing along that he thought of Bud Mulligan, who had gone out with "B" flight in an effort to find and destroy—or at least delay—Colossus. Thinking of Bud reminded him that they wore on their persons the means of constant communication. The chances were greatly against Bud's being on the beam, but it was worth a try. He took the miniature vocoder from his breast pocket and activated it on the secret S.I.D. wavelength. Vastly to his surprise, he got an immediate reply.

"O.O., chief! Where in Tophet have you been? I've been buzzing you for the past hour and a half!"

Rocky signaled back, "Where are you, Bud?"

"Look north," ordered Bud, "and east . . . about thirty thousand elevation. If you see five black dots in the sky, they ain't asterisks—they're us. Flight B, keeping an eye on the Mountain that Walks Like a Man."

"Then he—he's in sight?"

"How can you miss him? He's bigger than the landscape. Can't you see him yet?"

"No."

"Well, I'm afraid you will. He's heading your way now. Keep an eye on the horizon and—"

A sudden roar rose from the throngs swarming the safeway. It was a roar of fear, but deeper even than the note of fear was that of awe. Rocky, looking up from his vocoder swiftly, beheld two things simultaneously. First—the dawn of a new day. Saturn-rise, breaking swiftly, suddenly, over the horizon, brooming all shadows in its path immediately. And the second phenomenon—

**C**OLOSSUS! Colossus rising over the horizon . . . ahead, then mighty neck, broad shoulders, naked torso . . . rising from the other side of the world like a vast, bestial nightmare. A tremendous Colossus whose head was so far above the veiled cloudlets of Titan that from time to time he was forced to bob and weave in order to avoid collision with the "rogues," those tiny bits of cosmic debris escaped from Saturn's Ring which besprin-

kle space in the neighborhood of the girdled planet.

"Rocky!" Bud was chattering on the vocoder. "Rocky, what's the matter. CX, Rocky Russell. CX, Rocky Russell . . . Are you all right, Rocky?"

Rocky answered slowly, "I'm all right, Bud. But I just saw him. We all just saw him. He—he's tremendous!"

"You're telling me? See them manacles? He's grown so big they've split in half . . . right up the back! They look like the only reason they're hanging on is because they're imbedded in his flesh! And his height . . . Whew! The navigator here just shot an estimate! Over six thousand feet, Rocky! Colossus is more than a mile high!"

Rocky said, "Keep on the beam, Bud, and don't mind if I don't answer you immediately. I'm fighting my way north on the safeway, hunting for Lynn. She's in New Boston—"

"New Boston!" Bud's voice was horror-stricken. "My Lord, no! She mustn't be, Rocky! That's where he's heading for right now. He can see it . . . he's got a glint in his eye . . . a blood-lust . . . Oh, great gods of space . . . Rocky!"

The voice died in a tiny wail.

Russell needed no explanation of his agonized words. For he, too, saw the climax of that frightful action. Colossus had climbed completely over the horizon, now. There was no doubt he had spotted the city. He seemed fascinated by its twin towers. Like a destructive child experimenting with some new toy he leaned over, gripped the spire of the nearest between a massive thumb and forefinger . . . and snapped it off!

From the shard of stone and metal wherein a few desperate fugitives had taken refuge dropped tiny motes, tumbling hundreds of feet to certain, dreadful doom! Rocky could not hear their screams . . . but he could imagine them. One of those black fragments *might* have been . . . *could* have been . . .

He shook his head doggedly. No! He must not think of such things! Lynn still lived. *Must* live!

Then another sound burst so close to him that for a moment his tense nerves shrieked in agony. A mighty hissing roar . . . the explosive blast of a rotor-gun going into action. Glancing to his right he found

himself beside the very gun-embrace where in yesterday—"Lord, only yesterday? Not a hundred thousand centuries ago?"—a jovial gunner had told "Dr. Rockingham Roswell" fabulously genial tales of monstrous beasts. Could either of them have guessed that today . . .

"Gunner!" he cried.

The old warrior glanced up, identified him amongst the hordes of refugees. "Oh, you, Puffessor! Come on! I'm short-handed here. Crew didn't make it afore the attack. If you're still lookin' for fab'lus monsters, here's y'r chance to git some fust-hand experience—"

Rocky needed no second invitation. A terrible rage was upon him, now. Futile to attempt to any longer buck the mob to New Boston still more than three miles away. If Lynn had been in the city, neither he nor any man could help her now. The only thing he could do was . . . avenge her . . .

He dropped into the pit, and swung instantly into action. "What do you need here? Oh—short a prime-loader, eh? All right, Gunner—" He spun toward the charge-rheo, jazzed its fill to max, slammed home the breech of the rotor, snapped, "O.Q. Charge set!"

"Range," said Gunner mechanically, "Fire!" The beam blasted away. Then, and only then, did the old fighter seem to realize what had happened. His leathery old face crinkled, and he stared at Rocky in bewilderment. "Hey, wait a minute! What's goin' on here? Puffessor, where did you ever learn to prime-load a Mallory rotor?"

"The same place," grunted Rocky, "you saw a purple bird with six green wings and a lavender tail! Stop loafing! Let's give that beast another bellyful. Charge set!"

"Range," said Gunner automatically, "Fire!" A slow grin overspread his face. "Comets! Looks like I pulled the wrong guy's leg, hey?"

**B**UT not long did Rocky work with the gun-crew. Came another buzz from Milligan, aloft. And this time the S.I.D. sergeant's news was worse than ever before.

"It's no good, Rocky. Neither the groundfire nor our aerial blasts are hav-

ing any effect on him. Heat-beams don't even make his muscles twitch, and as for physical ordnance—the shells don't even penetrate his hide."

Rocky cried, "But there has to be some way to stop him, Bud! He's practically on top of New Boston now. After that, he'll turn on the Patrol Base—"

"And crush us all out," conceded Bud dolefully, "like a bad kid stamping out an ant-heap. That's all we are to him. Just so many ants. No, there's only one way left. The Flight Leader has decided we've got to use ourselves as human shells, Rocky. Bullets won't harm him, but if we can smash these ships into some vulnerable spot . . . his eyes . . . perhaps we can kill him before we . . . we . . ."

"Wait!" cried Rocky. "Ants! That's it! Not ants—but *Antaeus!* Bud, listen carefully! Those craft are equipped with repulsor beams?"

"Why—why, yes, but—"

"Then contact your Flight Leader immediately. Tell him these are orders. As an S.I.D. agent it is your privilege to take over any command in case of urgency. I want the three ships of your flight to turn on their repulsor beams to maximum strength—and bear down on the Colossus!"

"B—but, Rocky—"

"Do as I say!"

"Y—yeah, sure. But if they don't lift him?"

"Don't be an ass! Repulsors are used to move asteroids from trade-lanes, aren't they? Colossus is huge, but no bigger than thousands of asteroids! They'll lift him off the face of this world!"

"And—and then?"

"Then we shall see," said Rocky grimly, "if I have saved us, or just given us a few minutes' grace. If I'm wrong, he'll fight his way free as soon as the repulsors wear down. But if I'm right—"

"Well?"

"I've got to be right! And now—get going!"

"Y—yessir!" gulped Bud obediently, and disconnected to contact the Flight Commander of the spacevessels.

Thus it was that a few moments later, as Rocky and Gunner lay in their pit watching hopefully, as the unceasing throngs continued to block the safeway, casting fearful looks back over their shoul-

ders as they fled from one doomed place to another, that the five ships gathered together momentarily . . . then separated . . . then converged on the Colossus in a narrow V—their prows invisibly pouring repulsor radiation at the gigantic creature.

The reaction of Colossus was the only thing which assured Rocky his plan was being carried out. For the repulsor radiation was colorless. But as the ships neared Colossus, he bent, momentarily, at the middle as if he had suffered a surprise thrust in the belly or groin. Then an expression of anger crossed his features.

The ships were coming in beneath the protection of a cloud-bank, but Colossus spotted them. He flailed a whiplike arm at them as a pettish child might sweep at bothersome flies . . . but to no avail. The speedy craft swirled away, but kept their prows pointed at his midriff.

Again Colossus struck at them, and

buildings . . . and when it withdrew a moment later, a yawning hole gaped where had been city streets . . . a hole partly filled with the crumbled masonry of the once-proud skyscrapers . . .

But Colossus staggered back one step . . . and another . . . and still another. Then one foot slipped into the air—and *did not descend!* After it went the other foot. And Colossus *was off the ground!* Off the ground and being pressed farther and farther out into space with every passing moment!

A great cheer . . . a cheer which had in it half a sob . . . rose from the safeway beside the gunnery-pit. Rocky Russell, glancing up at the hordes who had turned to behold this last-moment salvation, felt a moment of pain strike at his heart.

Saved! A world . . . and all these . . . saved. But the one most important person in this or any world . . .

Get your tickets, you **PLANET** fans, for the space-voyage to surging adventure on weird worlds—and to the exciting centuries to come. For with this issue, **PLANET STORIES** is published *bi-monthly*—the March issue to go on sale *January 1st*. Reserve your copy at your newsdealers.

smashed one. Then a new idea struck him. Reaching above his head, by sheer force he tugged from a satellitic course about Titan a rogue rock of tremendous size. A rock which must have been every bit of fifteen hundred feet in diameter, a shard of matter hewn into a perfect sphere by long ages in the Rings of Saturn.

This he clutched and aimed at the space-craft. Let it be hurled upon them, Rocky knew, and in an instant every spark of life would be dashed from existence as the metal walls of the ships were beaten flat.

**B**UT the sphere was not hurled! It was the Colossus who gave way . . . not the ships! The cumulative pressure of the repulsor beams caused him to yield, bend, stagger! He tried to regain his balance with a lurching stride forward . . . and thus it was that the twin towers, pride of New Boston, were destroyed. Colossus' left foot descended crushingly upon the

And then he saw her! She had been fighting beside him in this very pit . . . weary, disheveled, eyes haggard . . . but still, to him, beautiful! And it could not have been mere coincidence that she saw him at the same moment. Their eyes met . . . and no longer was there need for words. Both knew what the other was thinking . . . both accepted the decisions of their hearts gladly. Without a word she turned and fled into the circle of his arms.

While up above, Bud Mulligan was signaling desperately, "Rocky! CX, Rocky Russell. Dammitahell, where are you? What do we do now? Our beams can't hold this mountain up here forever? What do you want us to—*Great guns of grief!*"

Colossus . . . *dwindled!* Like a tinfoil effigy held over a flame, his tremendous bulk began to slough away. It did not fall off in chunks or clots. There was no destruction of his flesh, not horrid streams of blood flowing from open wounds. Colossus simply . . . *disappeared!*

A mile-high roaring monster, pinned on invisible repulsor beams . . . then a half-mile creature screaming in panic . . . then a massive Thing a thousand . . . five hundred . . . fifty . . . five . . . two feet tall. Then a small, gray, shapeless wisp hanging like a shredded tatter in space . . . a sudden, silent puff of flame . . . then nothing . . .

*So found its final resting place the Thing which came from afar. The Thing which, in accordance with the theories of a scientist It had never heard of, had journeyed through black space to spawn on a hospitable world.*

*So ended another of Nature's blind attempts to convey a life form from one galaxy to another. So ended—Colossus!*

X

AFTERWARDS, Bud Mulligan said solemnly, "if you didn't see it very plain from where you was, I ain't going to explain what it looked like. It was . . . well, ugly. That's all. What *I want* to know is . . . how did you know it would dry up and crumble away if we could lift it off the ground, Rocky?"

Russell grinned. He said, "I suppose you'd be highly chagrined to learn it was really you who gave me the idea?"

"Me?"

"Yes. When you mentioned 'ants'. The word reminded me of a dim thought I had been trying all day to recapture, without success. It reminded me of—Antaeus."

"Aunty who?"

"Antaeus. You'll find his story in the folk-tales of our mother planet, Earth. Hercules, while engaged on his famous 'Labors' met this giant in mortal combat. Antaeus was a son of Mother Earth, and from her he derived his tremendous strength. Each time Hercules felled him, he grew larger. At last the hero discovered Antaeus' secret, and overcame him by lifting him completely above his head. Antaeus then dwindled . . . as did our own Colossus . . ."

"Comets!" gaped Bud. "That's exactly what happened? But why?"

"Because," explained his friend, "Colossus devoured not *food*, as we do—but *energy!* Raw, radiant energy. Titan not

only fed him . . . it gave him a *banquet!* The storage-battery which is this planet—"

"Eh?" interrupted Colonel Graham, startled. "What's that, Captain? Storage-battery?"

"Yes, Colonel. That is the secret of Titan, the secret Grossman learned and hoped to capitalize on after he had frightened or forced all other Earthmen . . . including the Space Patrol . . . off this globe.

"Titan is not simply a world . . . it is a gigantic storage-battery! It's 'acid seas' and 'metallic mountains' are a parallel of the simple voltaic cell. The mysterious 'T-radiation' is nothing more nor less than constantly reversing polarity on a gigantic scale. Humans are destroyed by it for the same reason they die in an electric chair. Titanians can endure it because they are endowed with the physical characteristic of being 'poor conductors.'

"Colossus fed on this steady stream of current, and in him electrical energy transmuted into matter. How, we do not know . . . nor will we ever, now . . . unless some day another of Colossus' race is cast by the tides of time upon the shores of one of our solar planets . . ."

"Which," whispered Bud, "God forbid! Well, it just goes to show you, everything happens for the best, doesn't it? I mean, if you hadn't masqueraded as a Doctor of Mythology so we could trap Grossman and shove him into clink, like he now is—"

"I might not have guessed," acknowledged Rocky, "the reason for Colossus' bulk. Yes, that's right. But speaking of myths—"

He turned to the girl.

"Oh, it's not *you* I want to ask, but your father. I would like to know, Colonel Graham . . . have I permission to track down one final 'myth' as 'Dr. Roswell' . . . and make her become 'Mrs.' Russell?"

Colonel Graham smiled. "Well, Captain—" he began.

But Bud interrupted him, groaning.

"Migawd, what a terrible pun! You had to stretch that one a mile, Rocky!"

It was then that Lynn Graham proved herself a suitable future wife in all respects. For she smiled gently, and:

"Well, why not, Bud?" she demanded. "According to the old adage . . . 'A myth is as good as a mile' . . ."

# Planet of No-Return

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

**The orders were explicit: "Destroy the 'THING' of Venus." But Patrolmen Kerry Blane and Splinter Wood, their space-ship wrecked, could not follow orders—their weapons were useless on the Water-world.**

OLD Kerry Blane exploded. "Damn it!" he roared. "I don't like you; and I don't like this ship; and I don't like the assignment; and I don't like those infernal pills you keep eating; and I—"

"Splinter" Wood grinned.

"Seems to me, Kerry," he remarked humorously, "that you don't like much of anything!"

Kerry Blane growled unintelligibly, batted the injector lever with a calloused hand. His grizzled hair was a stiff wiry mop on his small head, and his oversize jaw was thrust belligerently forward. But deep within his eyes, where he hoped it was hidden, was a friendly twinkle that gave the lie to his speech.

"You're a squirt!" he snapped disagreeably. "You're not dry behind the ears, yet. You're like the rest of these kids who call themselves pilots—only more so! And why the hell the chief had to sic you on me, on an exploration trip this important—well, I'll never understand."

Splinter rolled his six foot three of lanky body into a more comfortable position on the air-bunk. He yawned tremendously, fumbled a small box from his shirt pocket, and removed a marble-like capsule.

"Better take one of these," he warned. "You're liable to get the space bends at any moment."

Old Kerry Blane snorted, batted the box aside impatiently, scowled moodily at the capsules that bounced for a moment against the pilot room's walls before hanging motionless in the air.

"Mister Wood," he said icily, "I was flying a space ship while they were changing your pants twenty times a day. When I want advice on how to fly a ship, how to cure space bends, how to handle a Zelta ray, or how to spit—I'll ask you! Until then, you and your bloody marbles can go plumb straight to the devil!"

"Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!" Splinter reached out lazily, plucked the capsules from the air, one by one.

Kerry Blane lit one of the five allotted cigarettes of the day.

"Don't 'tsk' me, you young squirt," he grunted around a mouthful of fragrant smoke. "I know all the arguments you can put up; ain't that all I been hearing for a week? You take your vitamins A, B, C, D, all you want, but you leave me alone—or I'll stuff your head down your throat, P.D.Q.!"

"All right, all right!" Splinter tucked the capsule box back into his pocket, grinned mockingly. "But don't say I didn't warn you. With this shielded ship, and with no sunlight reaching Venus' surface, you're gonna be begging for some of my vitamin, super-concentrated pills before we get back to Earth."

Kerry Blane made a rich, ripe noise with his mouth.

"Pfui!" he said very distinctly.

"Gracious!" Splinter said in mock horror.

THEY made a strange contrast as they lay in their air bunks. Splinter was fully a head taller than the dour Irishman, and his lanky build gave a false impression of awkwardness. While the vitriolic Kerry Blane was short and compact, strength and quickness evident in every movement.

Kerry Blane had flown every type of ship that rode in space. In the passing years, he had flight-tested almost every new experimental ship, had flown them with increasing skill, had earned a reputation as a trouble shooter on any kind of craft.

But even Kerry Blane had to retire eventually.

A great retirement banquet had been given in his honor by the Interplanetary Squadron. There had been the usual



## PLANET OF NO-RETURN

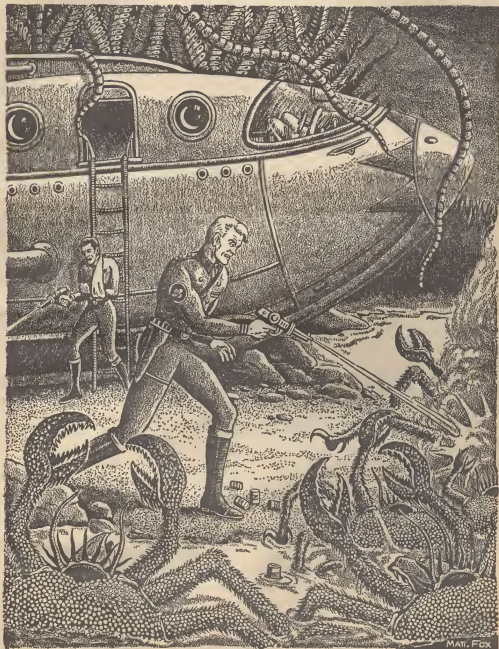
speeches and presentations; and Kerry Blane had heard them all, had thanked the donors of the gifts. But it was not until the next morning, when he was dressed in civilian clothes for the first time in forty years, that he realized the enormity of the thing that had happened to his life.

Something died within Kerry Blane's heart that morning, shriveled and passed

away, leaving him suddenly shrunken and old. He had become like a rusty old freighter couched between the gleaming bodies of great space warriors.

Finally, as a last resort so that he would not be thrown entirely aside, he had taken a desk job in the squadron offices. For six years he had dry-rotted there, waiting hopefully for the moment

*Illustrated by Fox*



*Kerry and Splinter retreated, their guns hot in their hands, seeing the crabs erupting from the ocean in a never-ending stream.*

when his active services would be needed again.

It was there that he had met and liked the ungainly Splinter Wood. There was something in the boy that had found a kindred spirit in Kerry Blane's heart, and he had taken the youngster in hand to give him the benefits of experience that had become legendary.

Splinter Wood was a probationary pilot, had been admitted to the Interplanetary Squadron because of his inherent skill, even though his formal education had been fairly well neglected.

NOW, the two of them rode the pounding jets of a DX cruiser, bound for Venus to make a personal survey of its floating islands for the Interplanetary Squadron's Medical Division.

"Ten to one we don't get back!" Splinter said pessimistically.

Kerry Blane scrubbed out his cigarette, scowled bleakly at the instrument panel. He sensed the faint thread of fear in the youngster's tone, and a nostalgic twinge touched his heart, for he was remembering the days of his youth when he had a full life to look forward to.

"If you're afraid, you can get out and walk back," he snapped disagreeably.

A grin lifted the corners of Splinter's long mouth, spread into his eyes. His hand unconsciously came up, touched the tiny squadron pin on his lapel.

"Sorry to disappoint you, glory grabber," he said mockingly, "but I've got definite orders to take care of you."

"Me! You've got orders to take care of me?" Kerry Blane choked incoherently for a moment, red tiding cholericly upward from his loosened collar.

"Of course!" Splinter grinned.

Kerry Blane exploded, words spewing volcanically forth. Splinter relaxed, his booted foot beating out a dull rhythm to the colorful language learned through almost fifty years of spacing. And at last, when Kerry Blane had quieted until he but smoldered, he leaned over and touched the old spacer on the sleeve.

"Seventy-eight!" he remarked pleasantly.

"Seventy-eight what?" Kerry Blane asked sullenly, the old twinkle beginning to light again deep in his eyes.

"Seventy-eight new words—and you

swore them beautifully!" Splinter beamed. "Some day you can teach them to me."

They laughed then, Old Kerry Blane and young Splinter Wood, and the warmth of their friendship was a tangible thing in the small control-room of the cruiser.

And in the midst of their laughter, Old Kerry Blane choked in agony, surged desperately against his bunk straps.

He screamed unknowingly, feeling only the horrible excruciating agony of his body, tasting the blood that gushed from his mouth and nostrils. His muscles were knotted cords that he could not loosen, and his blood was a surging stream that pounded at his throbbing temples. The air he breathed seemed to be molten flame.

His body arced again and again against the restraining straps, and his mouth was open in a soundless scream. He sensed dimly that his partner had wrenched open a wall door, removed metal medicine kits, and was fumbling through their contents. He felt the bite of the hypodermic, felt a deadly numbness replace the raging torment that had been his for seconds. He swallowed three capsules automatically, passed into a coma-like sleep, woke hours later to stare clear-eyed into Splinter's concerned face.

"Close, wasn't it?" he said weakly, conversationally.

"Close enough!" Splinter agreed relievedly. "If you had followed my advice and taken those vitamin capsules, you'd never have had the bends."

Kerry Blane grinned, winced when he felt the dull ache in his body.

"I've had the bends before, and lived through them!" he said, still weakly defiant.

"That's the past," Splinter said quietly. "This is the present, and you take your pills every day, just as I do—from now on."

"All right—and thanks!"

"Forget it!" Splinter flushed in quick embarrassment.

A buzzer sounded from the instrument panel, and a tiny light glowed redly.

"Six hours more," Splinter said, turned to the instrument panel.

His long hands played over the instrument panel, checking, controlling the rocket fire, adjusting delicate instruments to hair-line marks. Kerry Blane nodded in silent approval.

They could feel the first tug of gravity on their bodies, and through the vision port could see the greenish ball that was cloud-covered Venus. Excitement lifted their spirits, brought light to their eyes as they peered eagerly ahead.

"What's it really like?" Splinter asked impatiently.

Kerry Blane yawned, settled back luxuriously. "I'll tell you later," he said, "I'm going to take a nap and try to ease this bellyache of mine. Wake me up so that I can take over, when we land; Venus is a tricky place to set a ship on."

He yawned again, drifted instantly into sleep, relaxing with the ability of a space-man who sleeps when and if he can. Splinter smiled down at his sleeping partner, then turned back to the quartzite port. He shook his head a bit, remembering the stories he had heard about the water planet, wondering—wondering—

## II

VENUS was a fluffy cotton ball hanging motionless in bottomless space. Far to the left, Mercury gleamed like a polished diamond in the sunlight. Kerry Blane cut the driving rockets, let the cruiser sink into a fast gravity-dive, guiding it only now and then by a brief flicker of a side jet.

Splinter Wood watched breathlessly from the vision port, his long face eager and reckless, his eyes seeking to pierce the clouds that roiled and twisted uneasily over the surface of the planet.

Kerry Blane glanced tolerantly at his young companion, felt a nostalgic tug at his heart when he remembered the first time he had approached the water-planet years before. Then, he had been a young and reckless firebrand, his fame already spreading, an unquenchable fire of adventure flaming in his heart.

Now, his aged but steady fingers rested lightly on the controls, brought the patrol cruiser closer to the cloud-banks on the line of demarcation between the sunward and sunless sides of the planet. He hummed tunelessly, strangely happy, as he peered ahead.

"Val Kenton died there," Splinter whispered softly, "Died to save the lives of three other people!"

Kerry Blane nodded. "Yes," he agreed, and his voice changed subtly. "Val was a blackguard, a criminal; but he died in the best traditions of the service." He sighed. "He never had a chance."

"Murdered!"

Kerry Blane smiled grimly. "I guess I used too broad an interpretation of the word," he said gently. "Anyway, one of our main tasks is to destroy the thing that killed him."

His lean fingers tightened unconsciously.

"I'd like nothing better than to turn a Zelta-blaster on that chunk of living proto-plasm and cremate it."

Splinters shivered slightly. "Do you think we'll find it?" he asked.

Kerry Blane nodded. "I think it will find us; after all, it's just an animated appetite looking for food."

He turned back to the controls, flipped a switch, and the cutting of the nose rocket dropped the ship in an angling glide toward the clouds a few miles below. Gravity was full strength now, and although not as great as Earth's, was still strong enough to bring a sense of giddiness to the men.

"Here we go!" Splinter said tonelessly.

The great cottony batts of roiling clouds rushed up to meet the ship, bringing the first sense of violent movement in more than a week of flying. There was something awesome and breath-taking in the speed with which the ship dropped toward the planet.

Tendrils of vapor touched the ports, were whipped aside, then were replaced by heavier fingers of cloud. Kerry Blane pressed a firing stud, and nose rockets thrummed in a rising crescendo as the free fall of the cruiser was checked. Heat rose in the cabin from the friction of the outer air, then dissipated, as the force-screen voltmeter leaped higher.

Then, as though it had never been, the sun disappeared, and there was only a gray blankness pressing about the ship. Gone was all sense of movement, and the ship seemed to hover in a gray nothingness.

Kerry Blane crouched over the control panel, his hands moving deftly, his eyes flicking from one instrument to another. Tiny lines of concentration etched themselves about his mouth, and perspiration

beaded his forehead. He rode that cruiser through the miles of clouds through sheer instinctive ability, seeming to fly it as though he were an integral part of the ship.

Splinter Wood watched him with awe in his eyes, seeing for the first time the incredible instinct that had made Kerry Blane the idol of a billion people. He relaxed visibly, all instinctive fear allayed by the brilliant competence of his companion.

Seconds flowed into moments, and the moments merged into one another, and still the clouds pressed with a visible strength against the ports. The rockets drummed steadily, holding the ship aloft, dropping it slowly toward the planet below. Then the clouds thinned, and, incredibly, were permeated with a dim and glowing light. A second later, and the clouds were gone, and a thousand feet below tumbled and tossed in a majestic display of ruthless strength an ocean that seemed to be composed of liquid fluorescence.

Kerry Blane heard Splinter's instant sigh of unbelief.

"Good Lord!" Splinter said, "What—"

His voice stilled, and he was silent, his eyes drinking in the weird incredible scene below.

**T**HE ocean was a shifting, white-capped wash of silvery light that gleamed with a bright phosphorescence of a hundred, intermingled, kaleidoscopic colors. And the unreal, unearthly light continued unbroken everywhere, reflected from the low-hanging clouds, reaching to the far horizon, bathing every detail of the planet in a brilliance more bright than moonlight.

Splinter turned a wondering face. "But the official reports say that there is no light on Venus," he exclaimed. "That was one of the reasons given when exploration was forbidden!"

Kerry Blane nodded. "That was merely a pretext to keep foolhardy spacemen from losing their lives on the planet. In reality, the ocean is alive with an incredibly tiny marine worm that glows phosphorescently. The light generated from those billions of worms is reflected back from the clouds, makes Venus eternally light."

He turned the ship to the North, re-

laxed a bit on the air bunk. He felt tired and worn, his body aching from the space bends of a few hours before.

"Take over," he said wearily. "Take the ship North, and watch for any island."

Splinter nodded, rested his long hands on the controls. The space cruiser lifted a bit in a sudden spurt of speed, and the rocket-sound was a solid thrum of unleashed power.

Kerry Blane lit a cigarette, leaned toward a vision port. He felt again that thrill he had experienced when he had first flashed his single-man cruiser through the clouds years before. Then the breath caught in his throat, and he tapped his companion's arm.

"Take a look!" he called excitedly.

They fought in the ocean below, fought in a never-ending splashing of what seemed to be liquid fire. It was like watching a tri-dim screen of a news event, except for the utter lack of sound.

One was scaly, while the other was skinned, and both were fully three hundred feet long. Great scimitars of teeth flashed in the light, and blood gouted and stained the water crimson whenever a slashing blow was struck. They thrashed in a mad paroxysm of rage, whirling and spinning in the phosphorescent water like beings from a nightmare, exploding out of their element time and again, only to fall back in a gargantuan spray of fluorescence.

And then the scaly monster flashed in a half-turn, drove forward with jaws agape, wrenched and ripped at the smooth black throat of the other creature. The second creature rippled and undulated in agony, whipping the ocean to foam, then went limp. The victorious monster circled the body of its dead foe, then, majestically, plunged from sight into the ocean's depths. An instant later, the water frothed, as hundreds of lesser marine monsters attacked and fed on the floating corpse.

"Brrrr!" Splinter shivered in sudden horror.

Kerry Blane chuckled dryly. "Feel like going for a swim?" he asked conversationally.

Splinter shook his head, watched the scene disappear from view to the rear of the line of flight, then sank back onto his bunk.

"Not me!" he said deprecatingly.

Kerry Blane chuckled again, swung the cruiser toward the tiny smudge of black on the horizon. Glowing water flashed beneath the ship, seeming to smooth into a gleaming mirror shot with dancing colors. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Thirty minutes later, Kerry Blane circled the island that floated free in the phosphorescent ocean. His keen eyes searched the tangled luxuriant growth of the jungle below, searching for some indication that the protoplasmic monster he sought was there.

"I don't see anything suspicious," Splinter contributed.

"There's nothing special to see," Kerry Blane said shortly. "As I understand it, anyway, this chunk of animated appetite hangs around an island shaped like a turtle. However, our orders are to investigate every island, just in case there might be more than one of the monsters."

Splinter buckled on his dis-gun, excitement flaring in his eyes.

"Let's do a little exploring?" he said eagerly.

Kerry Blane shook his head, swung the cruiser north again.

"Plenty of time for that later," he said mildly. "We'll find this turtle-island, make a landing, and take a look around. Later, if we're lucky enough to blow our objective to Kingdom Come, we'll do a little exploring of the other islands."

"Hell!" Splinter scowled in mock disgust. "An old woman like you should be taking in knitting for a living!"

"Orders are orders!" Kerry Blane shrugged.

HE swung the cruiser in a wide arc to the north, trebling the flying speed within minutes, handling the controls with a familiar dexterity. He said nothing, searched the gleaming ocean for the smudge of blackness that would denote another island. His gaze flicked amusedly, now and then, to the lanky Splinter who scowled moodily and toyed with the dis-gun in his long hands.

"Cheer up, lad," Kerry Blane said finally. "I think you'll find plenty to occupy your time shortly."

"Maybe?" Splinter said gloomily.

He idly swallowed another vitamin cap-

sule, grinned, when he saw Kerry Blane's automatic grimace of distaste. Then he yawned hugely, twisted into a comfortable position, dozed sleepily.

Kerry Blane rode the controls for the next three hours, searching the limitless ocean for the few specks of islands that followed the slow currents of the water planet. Always, there was the same misty light surrounding the ship, never dimming, giving a sense of unreality to the scene below. Nowhere was there the slightest sign of life until, in the fourth hour of flight, a tiny dot of blackness came slowly over the horizon's water line.

Kerry Blane spun the ship in a tight circle, sent it flashing to the west. His keen eyes lighted, when he finally made out the turtle-like outline of the island, and he whistled softly, off-key, as he nudged the snoring Splinter.

"This is it, Sleeping Beauty," he called.

"Snap out of it!"

"Huh? Whuzzat?" Splinter grunted, rolled to his elbow.

"Here's the island."

"Oh!" Splinter swung his feet from the bunk, peered from the vision port, sleepiness instantly erased from his face.

"Hot damn!" he chortled. "Now we'll see a little action!"

Kerry Blane grinned, tried to conceal the excitement he felt. He shook his head, his fingers flickering over the control studs.

"Don't get your hopes too high, lad," he counseled. "With those super Zelta guns, it won't take ten minutes to wipe out that monster."

Splinter rubbed his hands together, sighed like a boy seeing his first circus. "Listen, for ten minutes of that, I'd ride this chunk of metal for a year!"

"Could be!" Kerry Blane agreed.

He peered through the port, seeking any spot clear enough for a landing field. Except for a strip of open beach, the island was a solid mass of heavy fern-like growth.

"Belt yourself," Kerry Blane warned. "If that beach isn't solid, I'll have to lift the ship in a hell of a hurry."

"Right!" Splinter's fingers were all thumbs in his excitement.

Kerry Blane set the controls for a shallow glide, his fingers moving like a concert pianist's. The cruiser yawed slightly,

settled slowly in a flat shallow glide.

"We're going in," Kerry Blane said quietly.

He closed a knife switch, seeing too late the vitamin capsule that was lodged in the slot. There was the sharp splutter of a short-circuit, and a thin tendril of smoke drifted upward.

"Damn!" Kerry Blane swore briefly.

There was an instant, terrific explosion of the stern jets, and the cruiser hurtled toward the beach like a gravity-crazed comet.

Kerry Blane said absolutely nothing, his breath driven from him by the suck of inertia. His hands darted for the controls, seeking to balance the forces that threw the ship about like a toy. He cut all rockets with a smashing swoop of his hand, tried to fire the bow rockets. But the short had ruined the entire control system.

For one interminable second, he saw the uncanny uprush of the island below. He flicked his gaze about, saw the instant terror that wiped all other expression from his young companion's face. Then the cruiser plowed into the silvery sand.

Belts parted like rotten string; they were thrown forward with crushing force against the control panel. They groped feebly for support, their bodies twisting involuntarily, as the ship cartwheeled a dozen times in a few seconds. Almost instantly, consciousness was battered from them.

With one final, grinding bounce, the cruiser rolled to its side, twisted over and over for a hundred yards, then came to a metal-ripping stop against a moss-grown boulder at the water's edge.

### III

**K**ERRY BLANE choked, tried to turn his head from the water that trickled into his face. He opened his eyes, stared blankly, uncomprehendingly into the bloody features of the man beholding over him.

"What happened?" he gasped.

Splinter Wood laughed, almost hysterically, mopped at his forehead with a wet handkerchief.

"I thought you were dead!" he said simply.

Kerry Blane moved his arm experi-

mentally, felt broken bones grate in an exquisite wave of pain. He fought back the nausea, gazed about the cabin, realized the ship lay on its side.

"Maybe I am," he said ruefully. "No man could live through that crash."

Splinter moved away, sat down tiredly on the edge of a bunk. He shook his head dazedly, inspected the long cut on his leg.

"We seem to have done it," he said dully.

Kerry Blane nodded, clambered to his feet, favoring his broken arm. He leaned over the control panel, inspecting the dials with a worried gaze. Slowly, his eyes lightened, and his voice was almost cheerful as he swung about.

"Everything is more or less okay," he said. "The board will have to be rewired, but nothing else seems to be damaged so that repairs are needed."

Splinter looked up from his task of bandaging his leg. "What caused the crash?" he asked. "One minute, everything was all right; the next, Blooey!"

Anger suddenly mottled Kerry Blane's face; he swore monotonously and bitterly for a moment.

"Those gol-damned pills you been taking caused the crash!" he roared. "One of them broke and shorted out the control board." He scowled at the incredulous Splinter. "By the three tails of a Martian sand-pup, I ought to cram the rest of them down your throat, boxes and all!"

Splinter flushed, seemed to be fumbling for words. After a bit, Kerry Blane grinned.

"Forget it, lad," he said more kindly, "those things happen. Now, if you'll bind a splint about my arm, we'll see what we can do about righting the ship."

Splinter nodded, opened the medical locker, worked with tape and splints for minutes. Great beads of perspiration stood out in high relief on Kerry Blane's forehead, but he made no sound. At last, Splinter finished, tucked the supplies away.

"Now what?" he asked subduedly.

"Let's take a look outside, maybe set up the Zelta guns. Can't tell but what that protoplasmic nightmare might take a notion to pay us a visit in the near future!"

"Right!" Splinter unscrewed the port cogs, swung the portal back.

He swung lithely from the portal,



reached down a hand to help the older man. After much puffing and grunting, Kerry Blane managed to clamber through the port. They stood for a moment in silent wonder, staring at the long lazy rollers of milky fluorescence that rolled endlessly toward the beach, then turned to gaze at the great fern-like trees that towered two hundred feet into the air.

"How big do you feel now?" Kerry Blane asked quietly.

Splinter Wood was silent, awed by the beauty and the tremendous size of the growths on the water world.

Kerry Blane walked the length of the cruiser, examining the slight damage done by the crash, evaluating the situation with a practiced gaze. He nodded slowly, retraced his steps, and stood looking at the furrow plowed in the sand.

"Won't be any trouble at all to lift the ship," he called. "After rewiring the board, we'll turn the ship with an under-jet, swing it about, and head her toward the sea."

Splinter nodded, dropped into the open port. A moment later, he flipped a rope ladder outside, where it dangled to the ground, then climbed out himself, carrying the two Zelta guns.

"We'd better test these," he said. "We don't want any slip-ups when we do go into action."

He climbed down the ladder, laid the guns aside, then reached up a hand to aid Kerry Blane's descent. Kerry Blane came down slowly and awkwardly, jumped the last few feet. He felt surprisingly light and strong in the lesser gravity.

He stood, leaning against the ship, watching as Splinter picked up the first gun and leveled it at a gigantic tree. Splinter sighted carefully, winked at the older man, then pressed the firing stud.

Nothing happened; there was no hissing crackle of released energy.

Kerry Blane strode forward, puzzlement on his lined face, his hand outstretched toward the defective weapon. Splinter gaped at the gun in his hands, held it out wordlessly.

"The crash must have broken something," Kerry Blane said slowly.

Splinter shook his head. "There's only one moving part," he said, "and that's the force gate on the firing stud."

"Try the other," Kerry Blane said slowly.

"Okay!"

Splinter lifted the second gun, pressed the stud, gazed white-faced at his companion.

"It won't work, either," he said stupidly. "I don't get it? The source of power is limitless. Solar rays never—"

Old Kerry Blane dropped the first gun to his side, swore harshly.

"Damn it," he said. "They didn't think of it; you didn't think of it; and I most certainly forgot! Solar rays can't penetrate the miles of clouds on Venus. Those guns are utterly useless as weapons!"

NEITHER of them moved for a long moment, then their eyes swung automatically toward the restless ocean. Kerry Blane jerked his head toward the ship.

"Get in there," he ordered, "and start that rewiring job. I'll stand guard out here, and, if anything shows up, use the hand guns we've got."

"But—" Splinter began.

"Damn it!" Command was in the old man's tone. "If we're attacked, we won't stand a chance without the big guns. There are animals on this world that have digestive juices more corrosive than hydrofluoric acid—they could wreck the cruiser in ten minutes."

Splinter darted to the rope ladder, swarmed upward. He paused at the port, his youthful face concerned.

"I'm sorry about causing the short," he said. "I didn't—"

"Get that job done," Kerry Blane snapped. "You're not to blame for anything that has happened."

He watched the younger man disappear within the port, then shook his head slowly, peered about the long stretch of silver beach. He swore bitterly for a moment, realizing the full import of the stupid line of reasoning that had equipped them with the wrong style of weapons on their expedition. Should they be attacked by the monster of insatiable protoplasm, their chances of survival were almost none.

He swung in a slow circle, studying the forest edge, seeking any sign that would indicate the presence of an alien danger. Tree fronds moved gently in the soft breeze, giving an uncanny life to the vines

and creepers whose tips lay on the silvery sand. He had the weird prescience that he was being watched, but could not detect the watcher.

He turned to face the ocean, sat on the dry sand, a dis-gun clutched within the curl of the fingers of his good hand. His broken arm throbbled unmercifully, a slow streak of pain traveling into his shoulder. He sighed unconsciously, lit a cigarette, then gripped his weapon again, the slim cigarette canted upward in his firm mouth.

Sand rustled a bit a dozen feet away. The old space-pilot watched the sand bulging slightly, then sliding softly to one side as a blunt, scaly head poked through into the atmosphere. He lifted the gun a bit, felt the skin crawl on his back, as a scaly lid peeled back from a single eye which stared at him with unwinking malevolence.

The head emerged from the sand, was followed by the sinuous length of a snake-like body. Eight tiny legs made little scraping sounds in the sand. Feelers, like thick antennae, unfolded from cavities in the head, flicked slowly back and forth. The creature hissed suddenly, moved slowly toward the seated pilot.

Kerry Blane blasted it into nothingness with full power of the dis-gun. A few flakes of smoking ashes drifted lazily in the breeze for a moment, and the odor of charred flesh was a dank miasma.

"Holy Hell!" Kerry Blane ejaculated, wiped quick perspiration from his face.

He felt the slight tap on his shoulder then, turned with a quick shake of his head. "Listen, Splinter—" he began, felt a terrifying horror draining all strength from his compact body.

He tried to swing the dis-gun up, felt the double band of rubbery-like creeper flip about his shoulders, pinning his arms to his chest. Terror constricted his throat, as his gaze followed the line of creeper to its parent plant that waited with blossom agape like some bloody, sucking mouth.

He whirled to one side in a diving plunge, surged with a desperate strength against the coil of creeping vine that was coiled so tightly about his body, was brought to a bone-shaking halt with a suddenness that jarred his injured arm with a force that cramped him with nausea.

His gun went flying to the sand, lay there, out of reach of his straining fingertips.

And now the creeper contracted with a deadly purpose and inevitability. Kerry Blane fought with braced feet to pull away, felt himself dragged toward the avid blossom.

He screamed then, called with every bit of power in his body, hoped that Splinter would hear him within the dungeon of the ship. He strained, tried to whirl, fought again and again against the uncanny strength of the creeper.

A dis-gun sang briefly; the creeper tightened as though in pain, then dropped to the sand where it writhed like the severed body of a boa-constrictor. Splinter, white faced, leaned out of the cruiser's port, blasted the parent flower out of existence with a hissing discharge of dis-rays.

"What the devil happened?" he asked. "What was that thing?"

Kerry Blane came shakily to his feet, retrieved his gun, kicked moodily at the now-silent length of creeper.

"Some aggravated form of the Earth's Venus-fly-trap plant," he explained. "I was plenty lucky it didn't get me by the throat, for then I couldn't have made a sound."

"Yeah, sure!" Splinter's freckles were dark against the sickly white of his skin.

Kerry Blane grinned reassuringly. "Better get back on the job," he said. "I'll make damned certain that nothing sneaks up on me this time!"

Splinter shook his head. "We might as well eat something," he said, some of the color stealing back into his features. "I've got some wire-plastic cooking; it'll be another ten minutes before it's ready."

"Bring the stuff out here, where we can eat and watch at the same time."

"Right!" Splinter disappeared into the port, reappeared a moment later with several cans and boxes in the crook of his left arm.

HE dropped down the ladder, squatted at Kerry Blane's side, opened the cans with twists of their keys. More composed now, he handed several boxes to Kerry Blane, grinned at the old pilot.

"Take several of those capsules, first," he ordered.

Kerry Blane grunted disagreeably, took a gelatin capsule from each of the boxes, then dropped the containers into his pockets. He popped the vitamin pills into his mouth, swallowed convulsively.

"Satisfied?" he snapped.

Splinter laughed aloud, followed the other's example. Then he handed a can of food and another of water to Kerry Blane, found cans for himself.

They ate for minutes, finding themselves strangely hungry, their eyes drinking in the strange beauty of the phosphorescent ocean, feeling contentment softening the terror and action of the past hours.

"It's just like a picnic," Kerry Blane commented whimsically, tossed a can toward the water's edge.

And then they were on their feet, cans spilling from their laps, their dis-guns alert.

The Venusian creatures were like visions out of a drunkard's dreams. They scuttled from the water on great, jointed legs, their crab-like bodies glowing from the millions of phosphorescent sea-organisms captured in the stiff hair that covered them. They screamed in a pitch so high the sound was like a knife blade cutting into the terrestrials' minds.

"This is it!" Kerry Blane yelled, dropped one of the creatures with a blasting streak of energy to its single, pupilless eye.

Splinter grinned woodenly, handling his twin guns with an inherent skill, dropping crab after crab, dull horror mounting in his eyes, as the creatures surged nearer.

The attack seemed endless. The sand was slippery with a greenish blood; and the crabs fed on smoking carcasses. Kerry's and Splinter's disruptors roared in increasing fury, blasting ragged holes in the vanguard of the attackers. A crab leaped through, knocked Splinter to his knees, was blasted into a quivering heap by Kerry Blane's instant shot.

"Back to the ship," Kerry Blane grated.

They retreated, their guns hot in their hands, seeing the crabs erupting from the ocean in a never-ending stream. Their breath was hot in their straining chests, and the high-pitched scream of the savage monsters was like a physical pain when it struck, their ears.

Splinter went up the ladder first, climbing with one hand, firing with the other.

Kerry Blane hooked his good arm through the ladder, braced his feet on a bottom loop, was hauled instantly upward. At the port, both turned and fired with a desperate, accurate fire.

THE entire world seemed to have come alive. Sinuous creepers flashed from the jungle, growing, uncurling with a fantastic speed, each capturing a dead crab, then pulling it back to the parent plant in the jungle. Scaly monsters bored up from within the sand, feasted on the shattered bodies of the sea beasts, pausing now and then to fight away the crabs that attacked them. From somewhere came a flying creature that appeared to be half fish, half animal, which swooped, then mounted sluggishly into the air, a crab's phosphorescent body dangling from its claws.

Kerry Blane shifted on his feet slightly, cleared four crabs from beneath the ladder, turned a sweating face toward his companion.

"How long will it take to fix the control panel?" he gasped.

"Thirty minutes, at least."

"Get in there and fix it."

"And leave you here, alone? To hell with you!"

Kerry Blane drew the ray of his single gun like a hose across a horde of attackers, grinned mirthlessly as they fell in convulsive heaps.

"I'm your superior," he grated. "Get in there!"

"This is no time for technicalities!"

A tiny smile etched itself around Kerry Blane's mouth, was instantly erased. He heard Splinter's gasp, felt terror driving him back a full step.

It came out of the water with a deceptive speed, great loops of itself flicking toward the crabs that scuttled wildly to escape. It had no definite shape, no arms, no features, yet it was alive! It surged up on the beach like a congealed mass of glowing syrup that rose a full hundred feet into the air. It had no eyes, yet seemed to see the entire scene with an uncanny intelligence.

"My God!" Splinter said wonderingly. "Is that the thing we were supposed to destroy?"

"That's it," Kerry Blane said tonelessly.

"And us with only four hand-guns!"

And even as he spoke, his gun went dead in his hand.

#### IV

THE sea Thing was almost out of the water now, its pseudopods flicking to the bodies of the slain beasts, resting momentarily, then drawing back into the main bulk. Almost instantly, the bodies had been dissolved and assimilated; so fast, indeed, that there was no appreciable interval of time between the flicking of the pseudopod and the assimilation.

"Get in that ship," Kerry Blane barked. "Get the panel fixed the best you can. Fix up a jury-rig. But fix it so that this ship can move within seconds."

"But—" Startled knowledge came into Splinter's eyes.

Kerry Blane twisted at the gun in Splinter's right hand, tucked it into his belt, pulled at the second. His face was like chiseled stone, and he seemed strangely youthful again.

"No heroics!" he said coldly. "One of us has to get back. I've lived my life."

"Listen, Kerry—"

"Get going! If you fix things in time, I'll come aboard. If that creature ever reaches the ship, neither of us will escape."

Splinter nodded, his eyes filled with tears of mingled bafflement and rage. He touched Kerry Blane gently on the arm, then dropped through the port. Kerry Blane watched him go, shivered slightly, then lifted the port and clanged it shut. His mouth was a thin gash, as he turned to face the Venusian monster.

He felt no regrets; it was a good way to go, with flaming guns and the surge of excitement deep in his heart. Far better than to die unsung and unwanted in some bed on Earth.

He fired directly into the slimy body of the gelatinous mass, laughed aloud as the flame of the shot pulsed redly deep with the monster's bulk. The gigantic blob of protoplasm seemed to draw back a bit, then flowed silently forward again.

Kerry Blane half-slid, half-climbed down the ladder, raced along the beach to the left of the monster. He dodged the great blob of protoplasm that was spat at his running figure, felt a sick faintness creep-

ing into his mind, when he saw the mindless horror move unerringly toward the ruptured body of a crab.

He paused at a safe distance, blasted shot after shot of rending energy into the glowing bulk. A crab scuttled past him, plunged into the ocean, sank immediately to safety. The protoplasmic monster moved like glowing tar over the beach, seeking fresh food.

Kerry Blane emptied the charge of one gun, felt a sick futility beating at his mind when he saw how little damage had been done to the insatiable slime. He tossed the gun to one side, drew the second, knew its charge was already half gone.

The protoplasm flowed toward the ship, flicking loops of itself at the few remaining bodies, then stilled to motionlessness.

Kerry Blane approached its bulk slowly, knowing he had to attract the cohesive slime his way, if Splinter was to have enough time to finish his repairs and make his escape.

He flicked the dis-gun aside, fumbled for a cigarette, laughed in sudden ironic mirth when his fingers touched the boxes of vitamin capsules. He opened one box, flipped the amber balls straight into the protoplasm.

"A balanced diet is the thing you need," he cried aloud, felt the first fingers of insanity plucking at his reason.

The monster surged forward, great loops of itself questing for Kerry Blane. He dodged one, felt a second touch his jacket lightly. He tore his jacket off instantly, hurled it savagely at the towering death.

"Let's get it over with!" he screamed.

And walked directly forward into the sea-Thing.

IN the ship, Splinter finished his wiring of the panel, wiped his tear-streaked face with the back of a dirty hand. He tested the installments, found they were satisfactory, turned the ship on its belly with a brief roar of an underjet. Then he peered from the vision port.

He swore briefly, harshly, when he saw that, except for the gargantuan monster, the beach was empty. His hands were clenched until the muscle-ache traveled into his shoulders.

"Damn, oh damn!" he sobbed in futile rage and regret.

He knew now how much he had revered the old man, how much faith and reliance the years had given him in the other's judgment. He felt then that he had lost more than he could ever regain.

"That's the trouble with the service now," a voice said disagreeably. "Too damned many, wet-diapered squirts! Sitting around, balling, when they should be tailing it toward home!"

Splinter turned incredulous eyes toward the side port, stared blankly at the grinning face of Kerry Blane.

"What the—"

Kerry Blane wriggled through the port, adjusted his broken arm into a comfortable position, then went directly to the medicine cabinet. He opened the door, ignored the other's amazement, proceeded to swallow half a box of vitamin capsules.

"Bellyache!" he said succinctly.

"I thought you were dead," Splinter whispered.

"Should be," Kerry Blane admitted. "But decided to live. Guns went back on me, I had to figure out something else." He frowned. "That's the trouble with you young squirts, you never figure out anything!" he finished accusingly.

"What happened?" Splinter asked slowly.

Kerry Blane jerked his head toward the vision port. "Gave that thing a bellache," he explained. "It assimilated two hundred vitamin D capsules. And Vitamin D, which is *concentrated sunshine*, is as fatal to its sunshine-denied life as arsenic would be to yours."

Splinter gulped. "But why are you taking so many yourself?"

Kerry Blane grinned. "Just in case," he said succinctly, "that baby's got a brother who gets a bite at me. My pills and me will give it the damndest bellyache this solar system ever saw."

They laughed then, laughed in relief and in quick, ironic amusement; and there was a mutual liking and understanding in their eyes that could never be quenched.

"Let's be getting home," Kerry Blane said. "Our assignment's finished."

Splinter nodded happily, reached for the controls.

## PS's Feature Flash

**FLASHING** you the highlights on Leigh Brackett, whose cosmic-minded yarns help to nourish Planet Stories.

**I** WENT through the usual procedure of being born. Time, Dec. 7, a few years before Pearl Harbor. Place, Los Angeles, California. Most of my childhood was spent combing a Southern California beach. I am an inveterate beach lover. My idea of heaven is a hunk of sand, a nice shiny sun, and a lot of ocean to play around in.

When I was thirteen, I decided to become a writer. I haven't decided yet which are the unluckiest—the readers who like Brackett or the readers who don't. But I'm working on it.

I reformed sufficiently to finish school in a blaze of brotherly love. My teachers and I got along famously, probably because I could act and make speeches. Crazy notion, but I loved it. I am a frustrated ham at heart.

I regret to say that nothing very exciting has happened to me. No hairbreadth escapes. No Great Loves. No Revelations. I taught speech and dramatics for one season, and swimming for three. I read prodigiously and always have, everything from Shakespeare to Dashiell Hammett, with a special fondness for fantasy.

I like to travel. Some day, after this tragic mess is over, I want to see the whole world, east and west, taking it slow and giving the tourist routes the go by. I like people. Any kind of people, as long as I can learn something from them. I like to wear old clothes and loaf in the sun and eat and sleep and talk. I like the movies, mystery yarns, cloak-and-sword historicals, and non-fiction about crime and contemporary world events.

I like to write. I like it more than anything else in the world, except, possibly, acting. (See? I told you. Ham.) I hope some day to become a good writer. I believe in science-fiction and fantasy as a definite form, entitled to dignified consideration. Sure, there's lousy stuff printed in the field. But show me one where there isn't. And show me one that offers a writer as much scope for imagination and the creation of new worlds. That we sometimes fall short is another point entirely. I also believe in science-fiction as an entertainment form and not as propaganda. Writers with Messages, in most cases, give me, as a reader, a large galloping pain.

And that's Brackett.

# Spoilers of the Spaceways

By NEIL R. JONES

**The Space-Wreckers were a law unto themselves, acknowledging no master throughout the planets as they plundered and pillaged. But among them moved Crespy—silent, dangerous, with a steady purpose flaming in his eyes.**

*Illustrated by Paul*

"SHUT that woman of yours up!" Leq Qwint snapped, his Oriental, slant eyes darting in search of Gort. "If she doesn't quit that snivelling, Sam Tee will have more custom!"

A brown, slinky Polynesian slid a thoughtful, oblique glance at his threatening leader to appraise the chances of another corpse being thrown his way. Sam Tee had a mysterious market for dead men and women. Of all this band of motley, interplanetary wreckers, who were even despised by other pirates roaming in search of prey between worlds, Sam Tee was looked down upon and somberly avoided by the men among whom he worked. They had seen too many of their own number fall into his hands. Only the two little, round spheremen of Ganymede, Chab and Weeb, accepted him in their thoughtless, mechanical way, ready to flunk at his bidding as they did for the others aboard the Rose Petal.

The Rose Petal, the flagship of the wreckers, was inaptly named. It was a hell-craft, a hideously grinning vampire bat of the cosmos, preying alike on worldly gain, human life and morality. The sobbing woman, Mada Linson, comely, and in her late twenties, was a survivor of a space ship lured to destruction out among the asteroids. Her dark beauty had provoked Gort's desire.

At present, the wreckers, a good two score in numbers, were working from a base in the Stoencean swampland of Venus, not far from the city of Yune. A hundred years before, during the 24th Century, there had an epoch of space pioneering even to the furthest planets and their moons, and since then crime had inevitably followed the advance of science, with Venus the base headquarters.

"Where in hell is Gort?" swore Leq, flexing his big broad shoulders, not seeing his henchman among those assembled around him in the gloomily-lit cavern.

"Drunk again," a burly degman from Dione informed him in the usual terse manner of the swordsmen from Saturn's moon. He gestured behind him with the long, bony blade which terminated one arm.

Leq Qwint eyed one of the natives of Venus, a slate-colored troglodyte. "Where is he, Klat? He's got a big job coming up! Now's no time for him to soak up Martian hama!"

Klat was one of the gang and commanded the small colony of ignorant and bestial Venusian troglodytes living in the low cliffs in the vast, murky swampland. Klat spoke a few words in his own tongue and motioned Qwint to follow.

Gort was drunk, and the approaching ship from the earth, the Cameo, could not be diverted from Yune and wrecked in the murky swampland without his aid.

LEQ motioned two of his men to follow. One of them was Ool, a gigantic negro with a horribly scarred face, criss-crossed and lacerated, with livid patches standing out in dirty, lighter color on his coal-black face. The other was a white man who seemed less degraded in appearance but fully fit to slit the throat of a fellow creature.

Crespy was a new recruit. Something of the spaceman was reflected in his appearance and manner. He was tanned a deep, Martian hue, bespeaking much activity on that world as well as travel in space among the sunward worlds.

The wreckers had picked him up in a dive on Ganymede where his quick,





*The Cameo smashed into the swamp and struck the ground beneath, rupturing plates, and sending a wave sighing in all directions.*

iron fists had saved Leq from the atom pistol of an Interplanetary Guardsman. Leq had always kept pretty well shy of this interplanetary police force. They had not yet caught up with him. Of late, they had either relaxed their search, or he had become too foxy. Besides, they had nothing definite on him that he knew about.

Crespy had fled with the wreckers, had become one of their slowly changing rank. Members of this degraded business occasionally died off and made room for replacements. Wrecked ships often held survivors who were ready to fight off the loathsome crew, and the wreckers occasionally fought each other over the spoils or on other matters. Sam Tee always profited from these squabbles and was on hand like a scavenger of the air to claim his prey, utterly indifferent as to the result.

There was a dangerous glitter in the gray eyes of Crespy which belied the rugged honesty of his features. Added to the slim, quick look about him, and the fact that Gort had once passed a casual quip concerning the nicks cut in the handle of his atom pistol, he was regarded as the adventurer type commonly met with on the cosmic ways. By appearance, he was in his early twenties. No one knew from where he came or what scrapes he might have been in. No one in this crew asked or cared. What he had done could have been nothing worse than what they were called upon to do.

Klat led them to a rough-hewn alcove beyond the main cavern. There, beneath a loosely-hung radium light, lay Gort in a stupor, the light shining dully upon his clean shaven features and fastidious clothing now rumpled by drunken neglect. Jark was tall, slender but powerful. There was more intellect in his features than in those of the motley horde he accompanied. A mask of dissipation lay across the fine features which suggested a faint recollection of better days and a refined atmosphere entirely foreign to this hell hole with its demons. Gort had been taking too much *hama*.

"Bring him around!" snapped Leq, giving the body an impatient kick.

Gort shuddered to the impact but other-

wise showed no reaction. Ool reached into his pocket and drew out a sharp instrument, a subtle smile flitting across his stolid face as he lifted one of Jark's hands and jabbed the point beneath the nail of Gort's little finger. The pain forced a groaning howl out of Qwint's lieutenant, and the leader grunted in satisfaction as Crespy jerked the man to his feet and shook him so hard it seemed as if his head would snap off.

"He'll come around all right, if we get something in him! Bring him along!"

Half carrying and half dragging him between them, Crespy and Ool followed Qwint out of the gloomy catacombs and down through the murky wilderness where the island slipped out of sight beneath the shallow swamp waters. The fogs had lifted, but high overhead swam the eternal blanket of clouds surrounding Venus. All manner of life on land, in the air and in the water made a bedlam of sound. Crespy and the negro quickly stripped Gort of his clothing, rolling him into the water, ducking and dragging him around where they stood knee deep.

When he showed muttering signs of recovery and staggering use of his own legs, making awkward, instinctive movements of a man swimming, they led him out coughing and sputtering to where Qwint stood patient and grim.

"Gort," he told him, "if I could get another rascal with the brains and ability you have, I'd never stand for this. I'd have you dumped in the swamp once and for all."

QWINT'S technical man shook his head as if to clear the fogs which had settled there. At Qwint's curt motion, Gort's escort brought him back into the cavern in the cliff, while several families of troglodytes looked on in dumb curiosity. Qwint made him swallow a preparation to sober him.

"That should fix him. Keep him on his feet. Walk him around. He'll be out of it."

Qwint's anticipations were realized. Gort finally came to himself with all his mental faculties sharp.

"The Cameo will be coming in soon. We've got to get busy."

"Sure, I know," Gort agreed, without any particular enthusiasm. "Just another job, that's all."

"I've sent out Cardmead in the flyer to set up static in the vicinity of Yune to block out port signals. Our light here will shine stronger against their filter sights than the light at Yune. They will see our light farther out in space and will be guided to it.

"And I duplicate Yune," Jark added somberly.

"That's all of it," Leq agreed. "We must get aloft and get things ready."

From the side of the Rose Petal there projected a blunt, cylindrical snout which terminated in a great glass lens. The wreckers swarmed out of the cavern and entered the ship. They shot skyward where a few miles above Venus they became obscured in the thick blanket of clouds. Rising out of these, the ship plunged upward through the rarified outer atmosphere where intense sunlight gradually faded into a gray twilight, and the stars appeared. This merged into the darkness of space. Their proximity detectors picked out the Cameo, and they watched its progress on the board.

After making sure that the Cameo had no accompaniment of Interplanetary Guard ships lurking somewheres about, Les Qwint ordered the Rose Petal down into the atmosphere again and below the cloud banks once more. Yune lay two hundred miles or more away from Qwint's island base. The Venusian city was built not far from the edge of the vast Stoencean swampland.

Gort, once they were beneath the clouds and a few miles above the swamp, became busy with apparatus having to do with the barrel and lens. First, the ship was moved around so that the lens faced the swampland on an oblique slant. Stabilizer rays were then brought into play to hold the ship at a fixed point. Already, twilight was descending, and the shadows were gathering over the waste of vegetation and water. A glare of light shot suddenly from the giant projector and illuminated an oval of swampland. This became less intense and was blurred by shadowy detail. Gort worked methodically and without hurry.

Below them, and to one side of the

broad oval of light spreading out for several miles, a yellow beam shot directly into the sky, cutting into the clouds above. This was the false beacon which was to be picked up by the filtered sights of the Cameo before coming in range of the true beacon at Yune.

Gort made a few more careful adjustments, and the blots on the great oval became sharp and clear objects. As if by magic, the city of Yune suddenly took form inside the big oval which lay nearly two miles below them and to one side. Gort was a maker of mirage. Here lay a phantom city. Yune was but one of a good many interplanetary cities he could simulate.

More adjustments corrected distortion and also eliminated all signs of the beam along which the picture travelled. A broad mask shut off the gleam of the projector, and not until the Cameo had grounded abruptly in the phantom city would those aboard it see the projector. Then it would be too late.

The yellow beacon light was located on the island, little more than a mile away from the mirage. Cutthroats and scrapings of the solar system waited in power boats, attending the yellow light with the slate-colored Venusians. If necessary, the unsuspecting Cameo would be given a treacherous power-shot from behind to disable it, but Qwint hardly considered it necessary. A trick of perspective diminution made this attack a rare necessity. Ships invariably crashed, pilots believing themselves to be higher from their objective than they really were. It was something like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, yet on a more conservative scale. Gort cut down the size of the projection to less than scale. He had also mastered the trick of angular reproduction, in order to project a city's natural appearance from a slant instead of from above. The swamp made a perfect screen.

## II

"WHEN we get this job pulled off, we'll head back for Ganymede," said Leq. "It will be good to see Loetta again."

Leq referred to his woman back on

the satellite of Jupiter. Loetta Chabeux was no bit of booty from a wreck. She had come to Leq of her own free will and was as hard as he and coarsely handsome in her own dominating way. She was a recent conquest.

"Where's our next job?" queried Crespy. "We'd better skip Venus after this."

"Right," Qwint agreed. Loetta has nosed out a good catch. A valuable shipment is leaving the earth for Dione soon. We may do that next, unless something bigger turns up, which isn't likely."

"Vaaneen or Laroos or what?" Gort turned in interest. "I have all the larger cities."

"I don't know that yet," Leq admitted. "We'll know when we reach Ganymede and the voyage is confirmed to us."

Wej the degman, watching the detectors with his beady eyes, waved his sword enthusiastically and caught the attention of all. "Cameo comes!"

The Rose Petal held the advantage. It was between Venus and the unsuspecting Cameo, the great planet nullifying the presence of the Rose Petal on the detectors of the Cameo. There were moments of indecision while they waited to see if the Cameo would follow the lure of the stronger light. They might see the lesser light at Yune and go there, even though it was weaker than their own beacon. The Cameo might have the hidden city beneath the clouds timed with the rotation of Venus. The wreckers watched and were not certain until the Cameo was less than a thousand miles above the surface. It was then determined by the direction of the course and decelerating speed that the ship was heading for their false beacon.

The wreckers waited and watched in breathless anticipation of success as the Cameo closed the distance between itself and Venus. There was no longer any chance of changing course for the true position of Yune. The Cameo was headed for the phantom city and disaster. Once again, it appeared that the plans of Leq Qwint and the technical ingenuity of Gort had scored.

The Cameo plunged into the cloud bank. It broke through into sight of those below, its under hull slightly pale in the reflection from the phantom city. Leq Qwint's

hard, glittering eyes regarded its rapid downward motion with approval. The horde in the boats would have no opposition to combat if this pace continued. Gort looked on with a supercilious sneer, ready to remove the illusion, once the ship had struck, leaving a blinding flood of light to guide the attackers below. The rest of the wreckers looked on with eyes of ravishment at thoughts of the treasures to be divided.

Ool's horribly-scarred, black face was set in a sly grin, and Wej's aggressive attitude of lifted blade reflected his excitement of mind. Sam Tee was the most hopeful, for it appeared that all the living on the Cameo would soon be dead and a source of revenue to him.

But the cruel hopes of Sam Tee were not immediately realized. Almost upon the phantom city of Yune, the Cameo madly braked its speed. It was too late, however, to check a violent landing, but even this tardy effort and the few feet of water saved the terrible impact which would have split and crushed the ship from stem to stern. The Cameo splashed into the swamp and struck the ground beneath, rupturing plates, and sending a wave of water in all directions sighing through the swamp vegetation.

THE wreckers in the Rose Petal saw their companions enter the aura of light and surround the fallen ship, the busy boats standing off and maneuvering. A clamor arose inside the Rose Petal, and Leq ordered it to descend and join the fun. With the light from the Rose Petal gone, lights from the circling boats commenced playing on the hull of the fallen space ship.

"Give them a few easy hints to come out of there!" Leq turned to the negro. "They can't be hurt very much!"

As they wheeled above the Cameo, Ool let loose a few power blasts which shook the ship lightly, causing it to quiver and send out ripples on the water. A few more plates, already strained, were loosened. From the slanting and upended door-port, a movement was seen. Someone had opened it and stood there, looking out upon the weird scene as if to collect his thoughts and wonder how Yune had disappeared like a magic city to be replaced by this

nightmare of the Venusian swamplands.

It was the commander of the Cameo who looked up at their swooping craft and then at the circling boats manned with yelping, joyous crews. One ruffian stood up and took careful aim with an atom pistol but never fired it. A more tactful companion struck him a savage blow which sent him reeling out of the boat and into its frothy track where he disappeared temporarily beneath the agitated waters only to reappear wading waist deep.

Someone in a nearby boat yelled instructions for all aboard the Cameo to leave it or be blasted to hell along with it. Leq signalled Ool to give this advice emphasis with another and somewhat stronger blast of power, and the negro grinningly obliged.

Soon after this, the commander reappeared with his crew. They climbed out the port and slid down the hull and into the water. The Rose Petal dropped into the water nearby, and most of its personnel, including Leq Qwint and Crespy, jumped into the water, wading toward the Cameo. This was Crespy's first wreck since joining the gang. Loud roars of approval and invective from the boats greeted the ducking of the crew. There were three besides the commander. A man other than the crew also appeared and slid down the hull. He was obviously a passenger.

"All out?" Leq demanded of the commander.

"What is all this?" the commander bluffed. "I am Captain Hammond! What is going on here? This ship is bound for Yune!"

Captain Hammond was middle-aged and gray at the temples. Despite his appearance of calmness, there was an unnatural note in his voice which suggested that he knew the situation he was in perfectly. "Why didn't you keep right on to Yune, then?" Qwint demanded, wading up to him. "Why are you trespassing?"

"Trespassing?" the captain exploded. "In this ungodly swamp? Nobody owns this!"

"I own it," the wrecker replied matter of factly. "My men and I are about to exercise the right of salvage."

"It's piracy!" swore Captain Hammond. "You're pirates! I won't give this up! You'll salvage nothing except over my

dead body!" His voice was savage.

"That's a good idea," Leq commended and drew his atom pistol. Four blue stabbing shafts of death struck down the commander. He fell into the water and bubbles rose where he disappeared.

The bubbles had not yet ceased, when a commotion of the water marked where Sam Tee made an underwater bee-line for the body. The bright-eyed Polynesian had witnessed the decelerated fall of the Cameo with fatalistic resignation to the fact that those aboard it would be taken alive and as slaves. He knew his friends, however, and was hopeful. His patience was already rewarded.

The boats came in close to take off the ship's cargo and transport it to the caves of the troglodytes. Portable ladders were joined and raised to the top of the hull. Boarders scaled them and disappeared into the ship. Meanwhile, the crew and one passenger were disarmed. The passenger was a man in his early thirties, was unarmed and showed no disposition for dispute. All were taken to a boat and guarded.

**B**OXES, bales and goods were brought out of the ship which commenced spewing forth its contents upon the level area of its hull. From here, the booty was passed into the care of those below. The lighter pieces were tossed to those in the boats. Heavier items were lowered by ropes or hauled and passed slowly down the ladders. Curses rent the air when misjudged articles were swallowed by the swamp waters or were carelessly dropped on the heads and shoulders of those below.

A sudden clamor and excitement at the point of entry into the Cameo drew everyone's attention. A shriek pierced the air, and there was a kicking of shapely feminine legs. Small white fists buffeted a dirty, bearded face bawling in raucous glee and jocose protest. A ripple of excited laughter arose from the wreckers amid a muttering of surprised comment. Here was a passenger who had remained hidden. The crew and passenger of the Cameo appeared crestfallen but not surprised.

"Ho! A lady, is it?" exclaimed Qwint. "Bashful, too! Seems like she's been hiding her charms, but Presnell smelled her out!"

As the unkempt wrecker climbed out of

the port with her in his arms, he turned, and they saw her head. Jet black hair tossed angrily as she fought the man who held her to him joyously and remained jovially undaunted by her vicious resistance. Her dark eyes blazed from a sharply handsome face. She might have been twenty or more. Amid the wild clamor of applause and jests, Presnell slid down the hull with her in his arms, and they splashed out of sight together.

They did not come up together. The girl came up first, gasping and choking, her black hair bedraggled and pouring streams of water. As Presnell came up a short distance away and pushed sluggishly toward her with an oath, the girl dove and came up and started swimming away from the wrecked ship. But she was not fast enough. An impassive troglodyte moved nimbly through the water and blocked her way so that Presnell seized a foot and pulled her back in his direction.

Rudely jerking the girl upon her feet, Presnell drew her gasping and struggling close to him. Her frightened eyes rolled wildly. His satisfaction was short lived, for a strong hand jerked him away from her, and a fist upended him in the water.

He wallowed to his feet once more, hurt and enraged. Through the sheet of water cascading from his forehead, he caught sight of a tall figure, holding the girl in one arm close to him. Snap supposition leaped through the tortuous channels of his mind. Was Qwint claiming this tid-bit for his pleasure because he was the chief? The clearing moisture dispelled this fleeting thought. It was the latest comer, Crespy, with more audacity than he could show and still live.

Presnell went for his atom pistol like lightning, but he had it out and not quite raised when a violet stream of death penetrated him in several spots and he fell backward into the swampwater. There was a moment's pause, a silence which might have portended more death, possibly.

But Leq Qwint cleared the atmosphere with a metallic laugh. "You are a man after my own heart, Crespy! We both take what we want! Presnell was too messy a job for her! He didn't keep himself up like you and I! See—she's not struggling, now! Again he laughed, and the others laughed also.

The incident was closed. Already, Presnell was on the way to being forgotten. Only Sam Tee was concerned about him now. The unofficial undertaker and seller of the dead left the corpse of the late Captain Hammond dripping water from the prow of a boat to sup out of sight like some evil scavenger of the swampland in the direction of the few bubbles which still rose where Presnell had fallen.

To the girl, it was all a horrid nightmare, this crash into a wild swamp lurking with death and preying humans who fought and killed each other. She had been wrested from the clutches of the man who had ferreted her out of her hiding place only to fall into the hands of another none the less purposeful. This new one was not as disreputable appearing as most of them. He might even be termed handsome in a hard, cruel way.

### III

THE trip in the boat to the island, followed by other boats laden with salvaged goods and carousing wreckers, was strangely unreal despite the rough bustle and clamor. She was hurried aboard the Rose Petal and shoved rudely into a small sleeping compartment where the door was slammed and locked upon her. Not a word did her grim-faced conductor address to her all the time. She felt that she was shoved into safe keeping like any other piece of chattel which the wreckers had removed from the Cameo.

Not until they were out in space and Venus was far behind, did the tall, lithe wrecker who had murdered his companion reappear. He brought food which he laid down on entering. Nervously, she sprang up, her eyes blazing, ready to fight off his advances.

"Calm yourself, beautiful," he admonished her, half in amusement. "Nobody's going to hurt you. By the way, what is your name?"

"Sala Martee," she replied, keeping her voice steady with perceptible effort.

"Married?"

"No!" she hurled the word at him. She was growing suspicious of his subtle approach.

"Hmph!"

There was a disconcerting note to the



grunt which angered her, despite her desperate position. To her, it spoke of ownership, also that there was a great deal of time and no hurry.

"I am Crespy," he confided.

"What difference does it make to me?" she challenged with asperity. "You're a wrecker, the same as the man you killed."

Somehow, she was inspired with the thought that she could go farther on bravado. It was characteristic of her. She might gain time before this interplanetary outlaw commenced to maul her, although what inevitable hope lay in this remained a mystery to her. Unless they chanced upon an engagement with a roving ship of the Interplanetary Guard, she might expect the same end whether delayed or hastened.

"Eat and shut up!" he advised her. "And keep this door locked from the inside unless you want company. No one has a key but myself."

He was more inquisitive when he came again.

"Why were you going to Yunc?" he asked.

"I had an office position I was going to fill," she rejoined, and turned questioner herself. "Where are we, and where are we going?"

"No harm in telling you, I guess. Right now, we are between the orbits of Earth and Mars, and we are heading for Ganymede."

"What are you going to do with me?" she inquired, showing no fear of him and approaching close.

"That depends," he made evasive reply, glancing up and down her appraisingly. "You're rather pretty."

"Has that anything to do with it?" she demanded, coloring at the thoughts his allusion had conjured. "You're going to sell me!" she hissed. "That's why you've kept your hands off me! I see it now! You're going to sell me to a pirate!"

"Steady, there!" Orn snapped warmly. "Nobody's talked of selling yet! I might want you myself!"

"I'd rather you'd sell me to a pirate, you damned, murdering wrecker!" she stormed.

"Is that so?"

In a tumult of anger and passion, Crespy had Sala Martee suddenly in his

arms, kissing her as brutally and with as much relish as Presnell might have done. She sobbed, fought and cursed him, but she was no match for him and fought herself out, lying limp and panting in his arms. He suddenly cast her from him as if in disgust, and she sank to the floor on hands and knees, staring after him wild and dishevelled.

A QUIET laugh startled her and also brought Crespy up short. At the doorway stood Leq Qwint.

"Now, my friend, it seems that we are getting places. You are taking matters in hand. If you need my good advice, I can offer it freely. I have learned much."

"I don't need it!" Crespy told him tersely.

"She has fine spirit, a rare quality in women," Qwint hinted. "Just what do you intend doing with her? She asked it. Now, I ask. Not merely out of curiosity, either."

"I'm going to marry her!"

Qwint's slant eyes widened perceptibly in surprise. Sala, too, looked up incredulously as she rose to her feet, then sat on an ornate chair which had once belonged on a luxurious space liner now wrecked.

"Marry her?" Qwint echoed in a small, unbelieving voice.

"I shall still belong to a wrecker!" Sala spat. "I would still rather be sold to a pirate!"

Pushing Qwint out of the doorway, Crespy closed the door on his tempestuous piece of property and locked it.

"I am unhappy I did not see her first," Qwint insinuated. "Would you sell to me?"

"No sale," Crespy replied quietly. "I keep."

For a long time Sala did not see the man who, far out in space aboard the Rose Petal, was her virtual lord and master. She remained for a long time a prisoner in the tight little chamber which had been given over to her. She was sometimes attended by the roly-poly spheremen of Ganymede in their simple, faithful way, then again waited on by Gort's woman, who with her haunting eyes pitied the girl for someday becoming the same persecuted slave that she was.

At first, little passed between them in

the way of conversation, but as they became better acquainted the little pleasantries and talks became longer and more intimate. And sometimes with Mada Linson came Raama, the red swordswoman who was the property of her hated brown master, Wej the degman. Raama, though she bore small, wicked cuts where her spouse had fondly carressed her with his blade, and revealed other marks made by his clenched claw-hand, was nevertheless unbroken in spirit and nursed a sullen, burning, unquenchable desire to kill Wej. She was the opposite of Mada Linson who was all but reduced to a nervous, hysterical wreck.

Fear had conquered Mada. She had seen frightful, bloody things which had left the red swordswoman from Dione unmoved. This wrecking business was not all one of taking prisoners, like the four from the Cameo who had been given into the keeping of Klat's troglodytes on the island in the swamp.

**G**ANYMEDE was not their first stop. They passed the orbit of Mars and threaded the belt of asteroids. Leq was searching for a particular asteroid, and Sam Tee seemed quite concerned, too. Eventually, the numbered asteroid was found, and in spacesuits Sam Tee and his two spheremen hauled carefully-kept bodies from a special compartment of the Rose Petal and out upon the asteroid. The muffled dead were carried over a jagged rise of the sharp-etched and airless asteroid and presumably into some pocket or cave, to be left there and picked up by persons unknown. This occasional grim business never failed to mystify and somewhat chill the motley crew, for companions who had previously been among them and had died violently were among the sepulchral watch left on the asteroid. It was not always the same asteroid.

"Wonder which is Presnell?" a red-eyed, bearded giant queried softly of near-by companions.

"Don't make no difference, now."

"A damnable business if I ever seen one!" was the opinion of a dirty and unkempt wrecker. The man scratched unconsciously at a scarred spot on the side of his head where his ear had been.

"Sam Tee is paid so much per body."

"Leq gets his cut, too, you can bet."

There was general agreement to this.

"But who buys 'em? That's the question!"

"The Asurians!" an old, wrinkled space mariner swore, showing a wicked metal spur where his left hand should have been. "The Durna Rangué cult!"

"They've been gone a hundred years!" a leering and oddly dressed wrecker scoffed. "That outfit got cleaned out on Mars!"

"Bet they're still hid some place in secret out further in space than we are!" the ancient asserted, gesticulating with his spur and crooked elbow. "They still experiment with dead bodies, and, yes, live ones, too, when they can get 'em!"

"Hama talk! You drizzle through your beard too much!" the younger and gaudier dressed ruffian sneered loftily. "These bodies go to some doctor or scientific place."

"Then why all this secret business—and the mysterious pay which is sent by roundabout ways?" the old one turned fiercely on the doubter.

"Would such as we, or Sam Tee, walk right in with 'em?" the other argued sarcastically. "Sure, Leq could walk right in hisself and say, 'Here are half a dozen stiffs, good condition; in fact, we conditioned 'em ourselves. References, the Interplanetary Guard.'"

The old man muttered in his whiskers at the other's satire, mumbling to the effect that, according to existent rumor, there were dead men who didn't stay dead, and that when he died he wanted no part of Sam Tee's hideous brokerage. It was farthest from his desires, so he put it, to come alive again among the horrible biologic creations of a cult which supposedly no longer existed except in legend.

They reached Ganymede in the system of Jupiter and stopped off at their headquarters. Although Sala did not see Crespy, she felt that he hovered near her all the time the Rose Petal was in port. As for Crespy, he did not trust Qwint too far. The leader had taken a liking for Sala, and the desire would likely grow on him. Ostensibly, the stop at Ganymede was made to arrange for their next job which was to be on Dione further out in space, in the system of Saturn. It also

gave them a chance to stow away the loot from the Cameo and give the men freedom temporarily from space travel. Leq wanted to see Loetta Chabeux, but Crespy knew he would miss no opportunity to spirit away Sala and claim afterwards that she had escaped. While they were on Ganymede, Crespy never went far from the ship, and Sala was always locked in securely.

**A**FTER a few days in the settlement of Adrea, during which time the cargo taken from the Cameo was arranged to be brought into legal commerce once more, the drunken wreckers returned to the ship. Qwint was now impatient to be gone, to be well ahead of the treasure-laden Golondra headed out of earth for Vaaneen, capital city of the red swordsmen on Dione. They cast loose and left Ganymede behind them like a red eye of evil, dwarfed beside the magnificent bulk of Jupiter rolling steadily on its axis in the near cosmic distance.

Like ravenous wolves, these wreckers gloated over the luring of the Golondra to destruction. Their brief freedom and dissipations had whetted their appetites for their devilish work. Rare metals were reportedly being brought into Vaaneen aboard the Golondra, valuable ingots easily melted, recast and salable anywhere with safety. Contacts made by Loetta had cunningly penetrated a veil of secrecy regarding the shipment. The information had not been general. In fact, the presence of the ingots was masked beneath an advertised shipment of refrigerated fruit.

Between Ganymede and Dione, Sala was suddenly allowed partial freedom of the space ship. She was allowed to go and come with Mada and Raama. She had asked for this privilege on seeing Crespy finally, after leaving Ganymede. He consented but warned her.

"Stay out of sight of the men as much as you can. If there's trouble, yell for help.

Crespy did not know that this move had been urged upon Sala by Mada and Raama, especially by the swordswoman who gesticulated with her short blade. Ordinarily, Sala scorned asking her captor for anything.

"Dione my world," said Raama. "Vaaneen my city. Get away there. Bring ship down like others."

It was Mada who planned sabotaging the Rose Petal's resisters so that the ship of the wreckers would be unable to remain aloft over Dione and would come down upon the moon. Nervously, she explained this in detail and by diagram to them.

"If they find out—if we fail, they'll kill us!" she faltered, her hands clenched in each other.

"Rather die!" Raama asserted proudly. "Rather than this go on!"

Sala nodded slowly, her eyes large with speculation. She, too, would rather gamble on this chance of escape than become the bride of a wrecker.

"We shall have to wait until we are close to Dione," Mada told them. "When the ship comes into Dione's gravitational field, it will be time to strike."

#### IV

**S**ATURN grew steadily brighter and larger, its graceful rings encircling it like silver bands. The larger moons shone dull and in various phases. They headed for Dione, the home of the swordsmen, and the moon gradually approached the mother planet in perspective parity. Not until they were so close that Dione dominated a large section of sky did the women put their plan into action.

It was Sala Martee who chose the dangerous task of sneaking into the control-room when she would be less likely to be caught, which was at meal time. Mada Linson testified to this likelihood.

Sala tiptoed down the corridor and peered cautiously through the crack of the open door. Her venturesome heart gave an excited bound of satisfaction. The control room was empty. Softly, she entered, her eyes darting in quest of the mechanism which disabled would cut down the resisters to a minimum for a safe, forced landing against the moon's gravity.

A fitting shadow stole up cautiously behind her as she fumbled in her pocket for the tool she carried to accomplish her purpose. Eager eyes in a dark face surveyed her hungrily, and a mouth opened to re-

veal the flash of white teeth in a dark face.

Ool seized the unsuspecting girl in an unbreakable embrace. Desperately, she beat at the huge negro with the metal tool, screeching for help. If it came, she must cover up what she had meant to do. Even in this predicament, her brain groped for an alibi to explain her being in the control room.

Ool grunted, his arms straining, twisting her savagely about.

Running feet slammed along the corridor from the mess hall. Crespy, half expecting trouble from Sala's new freedom, was off like a shot as her cry reached him. He found Ool wrestling with the girl, trying to drag her out of the control room.

At sight of him, the black gnashed his teeth in an ugly snarl, wrinkling the scars into deep creases. Holding Sala with one arm, he jerked his atom pistol loose. Crespy's gun leaped like lightning out of its holster, and a blue bolt sped through Ool whose own atom pistol sprayed the floor between them with violet pyrotechnics. Ool swayed on his feet, dying, still holding the girl in a grip she could not break.

Crespy took but a single step forward when something crashed down upon him and all was darkness. Behind him stood Wej the degman, and more of the wreckers poured into the control room behind him. The brown swordsman stared down in satisfaction at what he had done. He had dealt Crespy a terrific blow on the head with his sword blade and believed that he had done for the quick-triggered, meddlesome recruit once and for all.

Qwint and the others crowded up and looked at the two on the floor. Sala had struggled free from the grip of the dead negro. Qwint grunted approval as he saw Crespy, and his eyes kindled at sight of the girl.

"Drag these away!" he ordered. "We have work to do!" Then he turned to the frightened girl. "Get back where you belong until this job is over! I'll attend to you!"

Lugubriously, Chab and Weeb, the emotionless spheremen, went about their undertaker's work. Wherever this hell ship cruised, there was always much of this work to do.

THE first sensations to be realized by Crespy after the blow on the head by Wej were other-world impressions of fog, of an unnatural state of being, as if he were sentient yet something incomprehensibly unlike the human form, possibly not even of material substance but a disembodied spirit. These thoughts were but vaguely suggested to him, almost subconsciously, for his first impressions were not mentally acute. They were dreamlike. A melancholy hum droned dolefully into his consciousness.

As his faculties of perception became sharper, the feeling of being a disembodied spirit was dissipated. He became aware of a light breeze touching him and stroking him with varying degrees of temperature. First, he thought it was a cool breeze, then a warm one. The fog cleared a bit, and he could see blurred objects moving back and forth past him. Soft sounds reached him, becoming sharper as he trained his attention on them.

A brown and sallow face, impassive and dull, passed back and forth above him. Other moving objects impressed themselves faintly upon the tail of his eye. With a headlong rush, realization rushed down upon him. The sallow face above him, busying itself inspecting his body was that of Sam Tee, and with the realization there passed over him a wave of revulsion and sickness which paralyzed his movements.

He felt the Polynesian's soft hands on his naked body. Chab and Weeb moved about upon their dutiful tasks. Sam Tee was preparing him for storage until the Rose Petal should again visit the asteroid and leave its grisly cargo for the mysterious client. He would soon be placed in a chamber open to the cosmic void through which they passed, and he would remain perfectly preserved.

He remembered, now, how it had happened. He had shot and killed Ool. But what had happened to him after that he was unable to reconstruct. He did know, however, that here he was one of Sam Tee's victims. The Polynesian evidently believed him past the condition of rigor mortis and just a relaxed corpse. He would yet cheat the little brown ghoul of his revenue.

Sam Tee turned and spoke sharply to

his aides, and as he did so, Crespy rose to a sitting position. Sam Tee turned—and his mouth and eyes opened widely. Chab and Weeb stared stupidly. The corpse had returned to life. They had never seen anyone rise from the dead before.

As Sam realized the mistake, he showed his teeth in a snarl. He was enraged against this unfitness of things. Crespy had been considered dead and as such had been committed to Sam Tee's jurisdiction. So be it. Sam turned and seized a sharp, metal instrument, determined to strike down this rebellion of life against death. This time, there would be no mistake.

Weakly, Crespy struggled to hold the arms of the snarling Polynesian. The spheremen withdrew in astonishment to points of safety and watched the weird struggle. With more will power and desperation than strength, Crespy prevented the wicked instrument from gouging him. He was dizzy and now aware of a slight throb of his head. Momentarily, he could scarcely see his adversary to whom he clung tightly. If Sam Tee should break away from his grasp now, Crespy knew he was done for.

THEY fell to the floor together, the stench of the Polynesian's breath in Crespy's nostrils. The improvised weapon pierced his shoulder as they fell, and a warm, red trickle of blood ran from the wound. He felt the hard, cool floor against his naked body as they rolled over and over—then soft, rumpled cloth with a scattering of hard, lumpy objects. One lump in particular was large and gave him a painful jab. It flashed upon him that this was his discarded clothing. He felt the contour of his atom pistol and holster pressed painfully against his back.

Doubling his knees under the thrashing, fighting fury of Sam Tee who was trying to lunge with his weapon, Crespy sprung the wiry little Polynesian from him with an exhaustive effort which, however, served its purpose. He turned on his stomach and wrenched his atom pistol from its holster. His affected eyesight gave him only a distorted glimpse of Sam Tee who had risen and was bearing down upon him, arm upraised. Wildly,

he sprayed violet-blue shafts point blank at the Polynesian who crumpled up and fell, the improvised weapon clattering against the metal floor.

Shaking his head and clearing the mists which swam before his eyes, Crespy looked upon the excited and chattering spheremen who offered him no harm. In fact, they were frightened by his wild contemplation of them, and as he rose weakly to his feet they flung open the door leading to a corridor and scuttled out. He stumbled and reeled as he put on his clothes. His sight cleared, but he was weak. Finally, he was dressed, and was putting on his holster when the door was flung open and Qwint entered. There was a conspicuous absence of joy on the face of the leader at his recovery. Qwint held his hand on the butt of his own pistol.

"I see Wej didn't finish you!" he snapped. "And you have killed another of my men! You're costing me too many men, Crespy! We're done as soon as this job is pulled! You will be let off on Dione to shift for yourself. In the meantime, you'll be locked up where you can't pick quarrels and kill!"

Crespy knew this to be an ultimatum of death, a deferred sentence, for Qwint would never let him go free with all that he knew. Whether Qwint would kill him as soon as the Golondra had been pilaged remained to be seen, but any shifting for himself on Dione would be short-lived. A blast of power from the departing Rose Petal. That was Qwint's way. Qwint, however, kept up a semblance of fair dealing with the men for appearances.

"That woman of yours is dangerous to our peace and safety," Qwint continued as two ruffians seized Crespy one on each side. "Ool knew that you killed Presnell in order to have her. He wanted her, too. Others want her, but I'll have no further trouble because I am taking care of her from now on."

There was a triumphant gleam in Leq's slanting eyes and a smile of satisfaction on his flat face. He jerked his head at two wreckers who held their late companion.

"How soon am I to be set off on Dione?" Crespy asked of Qwint. "When

is the Golondra due to arrive from space?"

"The Golondra is already being lured here. It is a matter of a few hours yet. It will not be long."

"I must have been unconscious for more than a day."

"That's right. Everybody thought Wej had done for you."

"How are you blocking out Vaaneen from above?"

"The vapor cloud. It will hang in the stratosphere over the city long enough for us to get our job finished. Anything else you want to know?"

This last pointed sarcasm. The gratitude of Leq Qwint had passed. His attitude toward the new recruit had changed. For one thing, Ool had been an old and trusted companion.

"Nothing," Crespy said quietly.

CRESPI was locked in a small compartment which had no port out of which to look. A subtle and indefinable sense told him that the ship was figuratively anchored in one spot while Gort projected a phantom city of Vaaneen upon an isolated, nearby section of the moon's surface. Crespy sat down to await further happenings and the possible expiration of his fate, meanwhile recuperating from the rigorous experience through which he had passed.

In her own quarters, Sala Martee looked out upon the vision of a city below her, the phantom city of Vaaneen, and ruminated upon her own fate. She waited dully, knowing that the latest victim of the wreckers approached at that moment somewhere out in space, rapidly nearing the atmosphere of Dione, where the grim drama would commence.

"The cloud above Vaaneen is settling nearer the ground," said Leq, nervously, in the control room. "I hope the lights of the city do not shine through."

"It will last," Jafk confidently remarked. "We are lucky they picked a night landing instead of day. Our work would be cut out for us if it were not dark."

"We've pulled daylight wrecks before," Qwint reminded him.

"Yes, but I don't like them. They're too risky."

"Well, we shall soon have this over

and be on our way back to Ganymede."

"Where are they now?" queried Gort.

"Less than five hundred miles and slowing up before they hit the atmosphere," Leq replied. "Pretty soon, now."

"I'll be glad when we're through."

Gort wiped the sweat from his face, and his leader regarded him critically and laughed.

"I've kept you sober, and you can't stand the strain. When this job is done, you can go on a good spree. All the Martian *hama* you want, either drinking or smoking."

The Golondra sped closer to Dione. Its speed was checked, as showed on the proximity detectors of the Rose Petal. Like nervous, preying wolves, the unsavory crew of wreckers waited. How they loved the moment which was coming. It was in their blood. The prospects of treasure was one thing, but they also lusted for the crashing destruction of the ship and the quick boarding parties to overcome all bewildered resistance. Then followed the pillaging of the ship. All this the impatient wreckers eagerly awaited. There was spicy danger, too, in the fact that the Interplanetary Guard was always looking for them and was never too far away for complete safety. Lately, however, they had been extraordinarily lucky in avoiding the famed organization.

## V

"JUST above us!" Qwint finally snapped. "Be sure your beam is polarized, Gort! We don't want them to see it!"

Below and to one side, as always, lay the phantom city. This time it was Vaaneen, capital city of the red swordsmen. Raama, watching beside Mada Linson, muttered in wonder even though she knew it to be an illusion. There lay the red and white rooftops of the city, surrounded by the high wall to keep out the occasional storming bands of warring degmen. The women knew that Sala had been caught trying to sabotage the ship so that it would descend on Dione and be unable to leave. This plot had failed, although they believed that the discovery of her intentions had died with Ool.

An expectant hush settled over the



wreckers, as the Golondra came into sight, its broad hull dimly visible. It was a large ship. Again, as many times before, Gort smiled an oily smile of self-satisfaction as the doomed space-ship lunged for the illusion of a city he had created. Leq Qwint's eyes held their predatory gleam like that of a cat watching a mouse slowly but surely wandering within reach of its claws.

The illusion of distance had never worked better. In fact, Gort wondered if he had not overdone this clever detail.

At this point, a startling and unexpected movement of the Golondra took place. The space ship turned and barely skimmed a hundred feet or more over the surface of Dione and the phantom city which looked as though it were still a half mile further down. The wreckers gasped in surprise and consternation at this seemingly desperate maneuver, but they had no time to mull over it.

A blast of power stabbed upward from the Golondra and shattered the projector. The phantom city disappeared. An illumination float was shot into the sky from the ship which but less than a minute ago had been on its way to a sudden collision with Dione. A ghostly radiance lit the sky for miles around. More blasts of power were discharged at the Rose Petal which was already reeling from the shot which had destroyed the projector, ripping the long tube to shreds. The Golondra was unloosing power which did not belong to a peaceful, space-going freighter. The attack had been sudden and deadly; and slowly wounded, the drooping Rose Petal drifted and wobbled to the ground.

"Man the guns!" roared Qwint, white-faced. His was the courage of the cornered rat. "We'll fight them!"

In another section of the staggering Rose Petal, Raama shrieked her delight. "Down we come! What we try! What Sala try!"

Into Mada Linson's eyes came a sparkle of hope. Her lips parted in breathless inspiration and resolve. She was a woman transformed. It was as if a great weight which had long been bearing her down was suddenly lifted. The dead fires of her eyes were rekindled.

"Raama! We must help them! They,

whoever they are, will help to free us!"

"Come, then!" urged Raama, waving her short sword.

THEY unfastened their door and ran out into the corridor. The Rose Petal was fast approaching the ground, its guns lashing spitefully at the intended quarry which had turned the tables with such bewildering speed of action. The Golondra maneuvered overhead with an amazing agility unsuspected in a craft of this kind, eluding the power blasts spitting at it. Its own armament roared accurately, staggering the Rose Petal so roughly that Mada Linson and the red swordswoman piled into a heap against Sala's door where they stopped and called to her. She came and joined them.

"It is our turn, now!" Mada Linson spoke with a determination and fanaticism in her eyes which Sala had never expected to see.

The three women backed into doorways as a rush of frightened wreckers bore down the corridor past them. Wej, the degman, did not pass, however, but stumbled and fell over a small, sandalled foot thrust out to trip him. A small figure leaped out of a doorway and upon the startled degman's back, and a short sword blade, plunged deeply between his ribs, drank revenge for the months of humiliation and degradation at his hands.

Mada Linson, followed by Sala Martee, tiptoed lightly into the wrecked projection alcove opening on the control room. Gort sat there, half stunned and confused among the wreckage of his projection machine and paraphernalia. Without hesitation, Mada Linson went to a small cupboard and found a metal container. She quickly pulled the stopper and dashed the contents over the body of Gort Jark as he rose to his feet and stumbled toward them. With a wild yelp of pain, he dashed madly forward, and the women leaped to one side. He howled lustily. The acrid fumes surrounding him suggested burning flesh. In a mad, blind rush, he plunged through and over wreckage into which he finally became entangled and lay still. Mada Linson stood motionless, an insane glitter in her eyes.

The Rose Petal touched ground with a shuddering crash almost rightside up.

"Whoever they are, they are our friends," said Sala. "We could not fall into worse hands."

They filed down the corridor amidship, Sala in the lead. A sudden banging on a metal door halted them. Someone was a prisoner. The door worked only from the outside. Fearlessly, Sala turned the lock and jerked open the door, holding her atom pistol ready to fire. She backed up a step, and her gun arm shook as her eyes went wide in surprise. There stood Crespy, regarding her with sardonic humor.

"Hello," he said mildly.

"YOU—you are dead!" she stammered. "They said you were!"

"They thought I was—until I came to life," said Crespy, casually making a move as if to step out into the corridor.

"Stop!" There was steel in Sala's voice. She had recovered from her surprise.

"Your turn!" Raama exulted with a significant lunge of her swordarm.

"Yes—it's my turn," she said. "I'll handle this my own way. Go and see if help is coming."

Mada and Raama moved off hesitantly to do her bidding. Sala motioned with the pistol for Crespy to step back into the room where he had been imprisoned. He did so, watching the gun she held.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"I should kill you with it. I'm a fool, I guess. I'm not going to shoot you. I'm not even going to hold you for someone else to decide if you should be killed or not. I'm going to let you go, and hate myself the rest of my life for helping a wrecker escape the justice he so richly deserves. Now—get out!"

She moved to one side so that he might leave, but he did not do so. She still leveled the gun at him. He stood looking at her, a smile on his lips which perplexed and unnerved her of her purpose. From outside came the exultant cry of strange, fresh voices.

"Go!" she urged him in sudden anxiety. "Go before it is too late to escape, if it is not too late already!"

"I am not going to leave you," he told her, simply.

She watched him tower above her as he stepped forward and lightly brushed the muzzle of the atom pistol to one side. She suffered him to put his arms around her and kiss her. She tensed as loud voices echoed noisily inside the Rose Petal and footsteps approached along the corridor. Still he did not release her. She turned her head as the mingled footsteps came closer. Several figures stopped just outside the doorway.

"Here—what is this? Come out of there! And peaceful! With your hands up!"

Several uniformed men of the Interplanetary Guard stood with drawn pistols, mystified by this unexpected love scene.

"Can't anybody have any privacy around here?" Crespy complained.

"Lieutenant Benson!" one of the I. G. men blurted in surprise.

He was instantly surrounded by the clamoring group of guardsmen, and Sala was left puzzled and dazed on the outer fringe of the gathering. She touched the arm of a guardsman inquiringly.

"Who is he?"

"Lieutenant Herbert Benson of the Interplanetary Guard."

"Then the Golondra was a decoy ship?"

"You guessed it, first off," was the cheerful reply. "And the lieutenant planned it all. He even had a fake attempt made on Quint's life so that he could get in strong with him. He's kept in touch with us ever since then."

She soon found Crespy—or Benson now, beside her again.

"I guess I owe you thanks for all you've done for me," she confessed, looking upon him with new eyes, "and an apology as well."

"Not at all. I'm afraid I didn't act half the brute I should have been to lay suspicions Qwint might have had. But what is most important, we've broken the gang. Those who are not captured soon will be. They can't hide out in the country of the swordsmen without being hunted down."

"And that marriage proposal?" she questioned him with a shy glance. "That was all part of the act?"

"Not if you say so," he told her, holding her close again.

# Doorway to Destruction

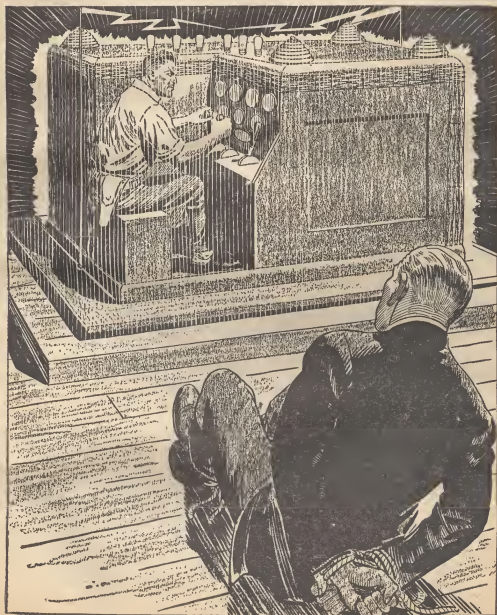
By **GAROLD S. HATFIELD**

**It was the Doorway to Earth's Destruction. And Kelvin Martin, the only man who could lock it—had lost the key.**

**O**LD Kelvin Martin strained futilely against the rope that held immovable his thin wrists. A crimsoned bruise raced across his forehead where

Vance had slugged him with a heavy hand. "Don't be a complete fool, Vance!" he said harshly. "That machine can't bring you anything but trouble!"

*Illustration by Doolin*



The scientist's burly assistant glanced wearily up from where he coupled heavy batteries in series at the rear of the glittering machine that entirely filled one corner of the windowless room.

"Shut up," he said tonelessly.

Kelvin Martin sagged back in sheer futility, felt a deadly numbness creeping through his extremities from the tightness of his bonds. He watched the other out of eyes faintly fearful and desperate.

"I'll make a deal, Vance," he said finally. "I've got about eight thousand dollars in the bank; free me, don't try to use that machine, and the money is yours!"

Jon Vance's laughter was brittle and scornful.

"Eight thousand!" he sneered. "Hell, I've seen those snapshots you brought back! Any one of those gems the 'other people' wore would bring that. And I intend to bring back all I can carry!"

Kelvin Martin shivered, remembering the restless cruelty that had lain in the creatures he had found with his machine. There was still a dull ache along his ribs where a needle-like ray of terrific energy had seared.

"They aren't human, Vance." He tried to speak quietly, endeavored to drive his point with impersonal logic. "They are of a fierceness and cruelty such as you couldn't comprehend. And with their superior weapons, they'd subjugate the entire world in a matter of days."

"Hooley!" Jon Vance spat insolently, patted the .45 automatic at his hip. "I think I might do a bit of subjugating myself."

He tested the batteries.

"I don't know how it works, Martin," he said briefly. "But I don't care, just as long as it makes me rich."

Of course, Jon Vance did not fully understand the machine; even he, himself, had trouble at times in comprehending the space-warping propensities of the machine he had built over a period of three years.

He knew only that the machine warped itself and its occupant into another universe—a galactic maelstrom of whirling suns and gigantic planets—onto a world where he had met a race of living beings that seemed to be super-endowed with unhuman hate and cruelty.

HE felt the sickness of futility within him when he remembered the one time he had invaded that other space. He had stepped from the machine and been greeted, cautiously but cordially, by those great-headed super-beings. For days he had been entertained and shown the weird sights of that alien planet. And it wasn't until he woke one night, to see the curious machine hanging motionless over him, its pale blue aura covering his sleeping couch, that he realized that he was being drained of his knowledge subtly every night.

He had raced from his sleeping room, fought with the single gun he had taken with him, blasted his way through the screaming mob that tried to hold him captive. He had fought down the long stairs, through the palace door, and had fled into the night, pursued by the men who had protested their friendship.

With his last bullet, he had killed the High-Priest, stepped over the prone body, and lurched into his machine. His fingers had flicked the levers on the control panel; there was the instant hum of purring power—and then the machine had whisked him back to his own planet.

He had sat for hours in the machine, too drained of energy to move, knowing that only a miracle had saved his machine's secret from the aliens that had planned to use it for an invasion of another space.

But now, because of the stupid greed of Jon Vance, because the man did not realize the slavery and terror the aliens would bring to Earth, the machine was gone—and he was a prisoner in the laboratory room.

HE made one final desperate plea. "All right, Vance, if that's the way it is," he said tiredly. "But if anything goes wrong, destroy that machine; those monsters will use it to invade our system."

Jon Vance whistled thoughtfully, watching the scientist out of shiny eyes, his heavy features drawn into a frown. Then he shrugged.

"If things don't go as planned, maybe I can make a deal," he said. "After all, I always did think I'd like to be a big shot."

"You couldn't!" Sheer horror froze Martin into motionlessness.

"The hell I couldn't!" Jon Vance stooped, edged through gleaming wires, seated himself at the machine's controls.

He twisted a rheostat, closed a switch, grinned at the supine scientist. Kelvin Martin said nothing more, but there was a grim determination replacing the panic in his faded eyes.

A vacuum tube swelled with coruscating colors, and a nimbus of light grew from a lacing of wires around the edges of the machine. There was a dull throbbing in the close air, a rushing sense of the releasing of terrible, unknown power. A misty curtain seemed to be drawing tight about the machine's outline.

Then the machine was gone from its platform, and Kelvin Martin was alone in the great, bare experimental room.

**K**ELVIN MARTIN didn't move for seconds, then he struggled into a sitting position. He fought the ropes with a silent doggedness that sent the hot blood pounding turgidly at his temples. His mouth gaped, as he strained and twisted futilely, and the panic in his eyes was a terrible force.

Then he sagged limply, realizing that the ropes were too well-knotted for him to release himself unaided.

"God!" he prayed.

He drew his legs beneath him, shoved himself back until his shoulders touched a side wall. Sitting there, he searched the room with feverish eyes for any object with a cutting edge. His heart sank, when he saw the bare sterility of the room. Without windows, without tools or furniture, there was not a thing in the room that could be broken or used to sever the cutting ropes at his wrists.

Kelvin Martin sobbed deep in his throat, glanced at the door, remembering how Vance had locked it and pocketed the key.

He remembered the cigar lighter in his pocket, tried to fumble it out, with the intention of burning his bonds. Dull horror pounded at his mind when he realized that his hands were completely numb, without the power of following the dictates of his mind.

He had no way of visualizing how long the treacherous Vance would be gone, no

way of knowing whether the man would return victorious. But clear reasoning told him that the monstrous people of the other world would slay Vance, then use Martin's machine as the doorway through which to pass their conquering hordes. Too, the machine would serve as the model for more carriers.

He straightened at the thought, memory struggling for expression in his mind.

He followed the lines of the walls, leaning against them for support, edging forward with agonizing slowness by jumping his tied feet. Perspiration dotted his white face, and his thinning hair lay tight on his small head, but slowly the smile broadened on his lips.

At last, he rested against the wall, then gently slid to a seated position. He tested his bonds again, ceased the futile struggle almost immediately.

He sat for a time, then lay back and stared at the ceiling. He thought of many things in those passing moments, thoughts of his dreams of giving scientific miracles to the world, of having his bust in the Hall of Fame, of people he had known, and things he had done.

Regret shadowed his memories, when he remembered things that he had left undone and unforgiven. Then he shrugged a bit, lay breathing quietly, waiting for the machine to return.

He felt the sensation of released forces a few seconds before the machine reappeared. He sat, drew his legs to his chest, scooted back a few feet. He waited, content, wondering just what would happen. He was smiling when the machine and its unhuman occupants whisked out of nothing into shadowy being. One glance they had of the smile on his tired face—then the very air seemed to explode with gigantic twistings and loopings of unleashed forces.

For Scientist Kelvin Martin had remembered one scientific fact from his college days. He had recalled that two material objects may not occupy the same period of space.

And sitting, bound, on the machine's platform, he had awaited the coming of the Frankensteinian monster he had created.

# OUTPOST ON IO

By LEIGH BRACKETT

**In a crystalline death lay the only release for those prisoners of that Ionian hell-outpost. Yet MacVickers and the men had to escape—for to remain meant the conquering of the Solar System by the inhuman Europeans.**

*Illustrated by Paul*

**M**ACVICKERS stopped at the brink of the dark round shaft.

It was cold, and he was stark naked except for the silver collar welded around his neck. But it was more than cold that made him shiver and clamp his long bony jaw.

He didn't know what the shaft was for, or where it led. But he had a sudden feeling that once he went down he was down for good.

The small, round metal platform rocked uneasily under his feet. Beyond the railing, as far as MacVickers could see to the short curve of Io's horizon, there was mud. Thin, slimy blue-green mud.

The shaft went down under the mud. MacVickers looked at it. He licked dry lips, and his grey-green eyes, narrow and hot in his gaunt dark face, flashed a desperate look at the small flyer from which he had just been taken.

It bobbed on the heaving mud, mocking him. The eight-foot European guard standing between it and MacVickers made a slow weaving motion with his tentacles.

MacVickers studied the European with the hating eyes of a wolf in a trap. His smooth black body had a dull sheen of red under the Jupiter-light. There was no back nor front to him, no face. Only the four long rubbery legs, the roundish body, and the tentacles in a waving crown above.

MacVickers bared white, uneven teeth. His big bony fists clenched. He took one step toward the European.

A tentacle flicked out, daintily, and touched the silver collar at the Earthman's throat. Raw electric current, generated in the European's body, struck into him, a shuddering, blinding agony surging down his spine.

He stumbled backward, and his foot went off into emptiness. He twisted blindly, catching the opposite side of the shaft, and hung there, groping with his foot for the ladder rungs, cursing in a harsh, toneless voice.

The tentacle struck out again, with swift, exquisite skill. Three times like a red-hot lash across his face, and twice, harder, across his hands. Then it touched the collar again.

MacVickers retched and let go. He fell jarringly down the ladder, managed to break his fall onto the metal floor below, and crouched there, sick and furious and afraid.

The hatch cover clanged down over him like the falling hammer of doom.

**M**ACVICKERS dropped into a circular room thirty feet across, floored and walled with metal and badly lighted. The roof was of thick glassite plates. Through them, very clearly, MacVickers could see four European guards, watching.

"They're always there," said the Venusian softly. "You'll come to love them, stranger."

There were men standing around the ladder foot, thirteen of them, with the Venusian. Earthmen, Martians, Venusians, pale, stark naked, smeared with a blue-green stain. Their muscles stood out sharp on their gaunt bodies, their silver collars a mocking note of richness.

Deep, deep, inside himself, MacVickers shivered. His nostrils wrinkled. There was fear in the room. The smell of it, the shudder of it in the air. Fear that was familiar and accustomed, lying in uneasy sleep, but ready to awake.

There were other men, four or five





*The tentacle reached out again, with swift exquisite skill. Raw agony filling his body, MacVickers reeled and fell backward.*

of them, back in the shadows by the wall bunks. They didn't speak, nor come out.

He took a deep breath and said steadily, "I'm Chris MacVickers. Deep-space trader out of Terra. They caught me trying to get through the Asteroid lines."

Their eyes glistened at him, looking from him to something behind them that he couldn't see. They were waiting, and there was something ghoulish in it.

The Venusian said sharply, "Tough luck, MacVickers. I'm Loris, late of the Venusian Guard. Introduce yourselves, boys."

They did, in jerky detached voices, their eyes sliding from him to the hidden something. Loris drew a little closer, and one of the Earthmen in the group came toward him.

"I'm Pendleton," he said. "The *Starfish*. Remember?"

MacVickers stared at him. The furrows deepened in his craggy face. He said, "My God!" very softly, and not as a curse. "Pendleton!"

The man grinned wryly. He was English, the ravaged ghost of the big, ruddy, jovial spaceman MacVickers remembered.

"Quite a change, eh? Well, perhaps we're lucky, MacVickers. We shan't have to see the smash."

MacVickers' head dropped forward. "Then you saw it coming, too?"

Loris made a little bitter laugh that was almost a sob. All the desperate boyish humor was gone from his face, leaving it old and grim.

"Who hasn't? I've been here—God knows. An eternity. But even before my ship was taken, we knew it. We can't build spaceships as fast as their Jovium destroys them. When they break through the Asteroid line. . . ."

Pendleton's quiet voice was grave. "Mars is old and tired and torn with famine. Venus is young, but her courage is undisciplined. Her barbarians aren't suited to mechanized warfare. And Earth. . . ." He sighed. "Perhaps if we hadn't fought so much among ourselves. . . ."

MacVickers said harshly, "It wouldn't make much difference. When a man has a weapon that causes metal to explode its own atoms, it doesn't make any difference what you stack up against him."

He shook his craggy head impatiently. "What is this place? What are you doing here? The Jovies just brought me here and dumped me in without a word of explanation."

Pendleton shrugged. "We, too. There's a pit below, full of machinery. We work it, but we're not told why. Of course, we do a lot of guessing."

"Guessing!" The word rose sharp on the thick hot air. A man burst out of the group and stood swaying with the restless motion of the floor. He was a swart Low-Canal Martian. His yellow cat-eyes glittered in his hatch-face, and his thin rosy muscles twitched.

"I'll tell you what this place is, Earthman. It's a hell! And we're caught in it. Trapped, for the rest of our lives." He turned on Pendleton. "It's your fault. We were in a neutral port. We might have been safe. But you had to get back. . . ."

"Janu!" Pendleton's voice cracked like a whip. The Martian went silent, watching him. There was more than hate in his yellow eyes. *Dando*, the beginning of the trap-madness. MacVickers had seen it in men who couldn't stand the confinement of a deep-space voyage.

The Englishman said quietly, "Janu was my glory-hole foreman. He rather holds this against me."

The Martian snarled, and then coughed. The cough became a paroxysm. He stumbled away, grey-faced and twitching, bent almost double.

"It's the heat," said Loris, "and the damp. Poor devil."

MACVICKERS thought of the air of Mars, cold and dry and pure. The floor rocked under him. Eyes, with the queer waiting shine to them, slid furtively to the hidden thing behind the standing men.

The hot wet air lay on his lungs. He sweated. There was a stir of nausea in him and the lights swirled. He shut his jaw hard.

He said, "What did Janu mean, the rest of our natural lives? They'll let us go when the war's over—if there's anything left to go to."

There was a tight little silence. And then, from the shadows against the wall,

there came a brittle, whispering laugh.

"The war? They let us go before that!"

The group parted. MacVickers had a brief glimpse of a huge man crouched in a strange position on the floor. Then he couldn't see anything but the shape that came slowly out into the light.

It moved with a stiff, tottering gait, and its naked feet made a dry clicking sound on the metal floor. MacVickers' hand closed hard on the ladder behind him.

It had been a man, an Earthman. His body was still tall, his features still fine. But there was a film over him, a pale blue-green sheathe that glistened dully.

He thrust out an arm, with a hand on it like a hand carved in aquamarine. "Touch it," he whispered.

MacVickers touched it. It was quite hard, and warm only with the heat of the air. MacVickers' grey-green eyes met the sunken, sheathed eyes of the Earthman. His body hurt with the effort to control it.

"When we can no longer move," the whispering voice said, "they take us up the shaft and throw us over, into the mud. That's why you're here—because we were one man short."

MacVickers put his hand back on the ladder rung. "How long?"

"About three Earth months."

He looked at the blue-green stain that smeared them all. The color of the mud. His hands sweated on the ladder rung.

"What is it?"

"Something in the mud. A radioactivity, I think. It seems to turn the carbon in human flesh to a crystalline form. You become a living jewel. It's painless. But it's . . ." He didn't finish.

Beads of sweat stood on MacVickers' forehead. The men standing watching him smiled a little. There was motion behind them. Loris and Pendleton stiffened, and their eyes met.

MacVickers said steadily, "I don't understand. The mud's outside."

Loris said, with a queer, hurried urgency, "You will. It's almost time for the other shift. . . ."

He broke off. Men scattered suddenly, crouching back in a rough circle, grinning

with feral nervousness. The room was suddenly quiet.

The crouching man had risen. He stood with his huge corded legs wide apart, swaying with the swaying of the floor, his round head sunk between ridges of muscle, studying the Earthman out of pale, flat eyes.

Loris put his old, bitter boy's face close to MacVickers. His whisper was almost inaudible.

"Birek. He's boss here. He's mad. Don't fight him."

## II

MAC VICKERS' grey-green eyes narrowed. He didn't move. Birek breathed in slow, deep sighs. He was a Venusian, a coal-swamper from his size and pallor and the filthy-white hair clubbed in his neck.

He shimmered, very faintly in the dim light. The first jewel-crust was forming across his skin.

Knife-sharp and startling across the silence, a round hatch-cover in the floor clashed open. Sweat broke cold on MacVickers. Men began to come out of the hole, just at the edge of his vision. Naked, dirty men with silver collars.

They had been talking, cursing, jostling. The first ones saw Birek and stopped, and the silence trickled back down the shaft. It was utterly quiet again, except for the harsh straining of lungs against the hot, wet air and the soft sounds of naked men climbing the ladder.

The cords ridged on MacVickers' jaw. He shifted his balance slightly, away from the ladder. He could see the faces thrust forward in the dim light, eager, waiting.

Shining eyes, shining teeth, cheek-bones shining with sweat. Frightened, suffering men, watching another man fear and suffer, and being glad about it.

Birek moved forward, slowly. His eyes held a pale glitter, like distant ice, and his lips smiled.

"I prayed," he said softly. "I was answered. You, new man! Get down on your belly."

Loris grinned at Birek, but there was no humor in his eyes. He had drawn a little away from MacVickers. He said carelessly:

"There's no time for that now, Birek. It's our shift. They'll be burning us if we don't go."

Birek repeated, "Down on your belly," not looking at Loris.

A vein began to throb on MacVickers' forehead. He looked slight, almost small against the Venusian's huge bulk.

He said quietly, "I'm not looking for trouble.

"Then get down."

"Sorry," said MacVickers. "Not today."

Pendleton's voice cracked out sharply. "Let him alone, Birek! You men, down the ladder! They're going for the shockers."

MacVickers was aware of movement overhead, beyond the glass roof. Men began to drop slowly, reluctantly, down the ladder. There was sweat on Pendleton's forehead and Loris' face was as grey as his eyes.

Birek said hoarsely, "Down! Grovel!

Birek's right swept in, across the side of his head.

MacVickers went down, on his right side. Birek put a foot in the small of his back. "Down," he said. "Grovel."

MacVickers twisted under the foot, snarling. He brought up his own feet, viciously, with all his strength. The pain of impact made him whimper, but Birek staggered back, thrown off balance.

There was no sign of hurt in his face. He stood there, looking down at MacVickers. Suddenly, shockingly, he was crying. He made no sound. He didn't move. But the tears ran out of his eyes.

A deep, slow shudder shook MacVickers. He said softly, "There's no pain, is there?"

Birek didn't speak. The tears glistened over the faint, hard film on his cheeks. MacVickers got up slowly. The furrows were deep and harsh in his face and his lips were white.

Loris pulled at him. Somewhere Pendle-

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Then you can go."

"No." The ladder was beyond Birek. There was no way past him.

Loris said, in a swift harsh whisper, "Get down, MacVickers. For God's sake get down, and then come on!"

MacVickers shook his head stubbornly. The giant smiled. There was something horribly wrong about that smile. It was the smile of a man in agony when he feels the anaesthetic taking hold. Peaceful, and happy.

He struck out, startlingly fast for such a big man. MacVickers shrank aside. The fist grazed past his head, tearing his ear. He crouched and went in, trying for a fast body-blow and a sidestep.

He'd forgotten the glimmering sheathe. His fist struck Birek on the mark, and it was like striking glass that didn't shatter. The pain shot up his arm, numbing, slowing, sickening. Blood spattered out from his knuckles.

ton's voice was yelling, "Hurry! Hurry, please!"

**T**HE guards were doing something overhead. There was a faint crackling sound, a flicker of sparks in a circle around the top of the wall. Shivering, tingling pain swept through MacVickers from the silver collar at his throat.

Men began to whisper and curse. Loris clawed at him, shoved him down the ladder, kicked his face to make him hurry. The pain abated.

MacVickers looked up. The great corded legs of Birek were coming down, the soles of the feet making a faint, hard sound on the rungs.

The hatch closed overhead. The voice of the dying Earthman came dry and soft over his shoulder.

"Here's where you'll work until you die. How do you like it?"

MacVickers turned, scowling. It was

hot. The room above was cool by comparison. The air was thick and sluggish with the reek of heated oil and metal. It was a big space, running clear to the curving wall, but the effect was of stifling, cramped confinement.

Machinery crammed the place, roaring and hissing and clattering, running in a circuit from huge intake pumps through meaningless bulking shapes to a forced-air outlet, with oil-pumps between them.

The pumps brought mud into a broad sluice, and the blue-green stain of it was everywhere.

There were two glassite control boxes high on the walls, each with a black, tentacled European. About five feet overhead was a system of metal catwalks giving complete coverage of the floor area. There were Europeans on the walks, too, eight of them, patrolling steadily.

Their sleek, featureless bodies were safe from contact with the mud. They carried heavy plastic tubes in their tentacles, and there were heavy-duty shockers mounted at every intersection.

MacVickers grinned dourly. "Trustful lot."

"Very." Pendleton nudged him over toward a drive motor attached to some kind of a centrifugal separator. Loris and the blue-sheathed Earthman followed, with Birek coming slowly behind him.

MacVickers said, "What's all this for?" Pendleton shook his head. "We don't know. But we have an idea that Jovium comes from the mud."

"Jovium!" MacVickers' grey-green eyes began to grow hot. "The stuff that's winning this war for them. The metal destroyer!"

"We're not sure, of course." Pendleton's infinitely weary eyes turned across the stretch of greasy metal deck to the end of the circuit. But look there. What does that suggest to you?"

The huge pipe of the forced-air ejector ran along the deck there behind a screen of heavy metal mesh. Just above it, enclosed behind three thicknesses of glassite, was a duct leading upward. The duct, from the inordinate size of its supports and its color, was pure lead.

Lead. Lead pipe, lead armor. Radiations that changed living men into half-

living diamonds. Nobody knew what Jovium was or where it came from—only it did.

But scientists on the three besieged worlds thought it was probably an isotope of some powerful radioactive metal, perhaps uranium, capable of setting up a violent progressive breakdown in metallic atoms.

"If," said MacVickers softly, "the pipe were lined with plastic. . . . Blue mud! I've traded through these moons, and the only other deposit of that mud is a sauce-panful on J-XI! This must be their only source."

Loris shoved an oil can at him. "What difference does it make?" he said savagely.

MacVickers took the can without seeing it. "They store it up there, then, in the space between the inner wall and the outer. If somebody could get up there and set the stuff off. . . ."

Pendleton's mouth twisted. "Can you see any way?"

He looked. Guards and shockers, charged ladders and metal screens. No weapons, no place to conceal them anyway. He said doggedly:

"But if someone could escape and get word back. . . . This contraption is a potential bomb big enough to blow Io out of space! The experts think it only takes a fraction of a gram of the pure stuff to power a disintegrator shell."

There was a pulse beating hard under his jaw and his grey-green eyes were bright.

Loris said, "Escape." He said it as though it were the most infinitely beautiful word in existence, and as though it burned his mouth.

"Escape," whispered the man with the shimmering, deadly sheath of aquamarine. "There is no escape but—this."

MAC VICKERS said, into the silence that followed, "I'm going to try. One thing or the other, I'm going to try."

Pendleton's incredibly tired eyes looked at the livid burns on MacVickers' face. "It's been tried. And it's no use."

Birek moved suddenly out of his queer, dazed stillness. He looked up and made a hoarse sound in his throat. MacVickers caught a flicker of motion overhead, but he didn't pay attention to it. He went on,

speaking quietly in a flat, level voice.

"There's a war on. We're all in it. Soldiers, civilians, and kings, the big fellows and the little ones. When I got my master's ticket, they told me a man's duty wasn't done until his ship was cradled or he was dead.

"My ship's gone. But I haven't died, yet."

Pendleton's broad, gaunt shoulders drooped. He turned his head away. Loris' face was a death-mask carved from grey bone. He said, almost inaudibly:

"Shut up, damn you. Shut up."

The movement was closer overhead, ominously close. The men scattered across the pit had stopped working, watching MacVickers with glistening, burning eyes across hot oil-filmed metal.

MacVickers said harshly, "I know what's wrong with you. You were broken before you came, thinking the smash was coming and it was no use."

Pendleton whispered, "You don't know, the things they do to you."

Stiff and dry out of the Earthman's aquamarine mask, came the words, "You'll learn. There's no hope, MacVickers, and the men have all they can bear without pain.

"If you bring them more suffering, MacVickers, they'll kill you."

Heat. Oil and reeking metal, and white stiff faces filmed with sweat. Eyes shining, hot and glittering with fear. Rocking floor and sucking pumps and a clutching nausea in his belly. Birek, standing straight and still, watching him. Watching. Everybody, watching.

MacVickers put his hand flat on the engine-housing beside him. "There's more to it than duty," he said softly, and smiled, without humor, the vertical lines deep in his cheeks. His gaunt Celtic head had a grim beauty.

His voice rang clear across the roar of the machines. "I'm Christopher Rory MacVickers. I'm the most important thing in the universe. And if I have to give my life, it'll not be without return on the value of it!"

Janu the Martian, away on the other side of the pit, made a shrill wailing cry. Loris and Pendleton flinched away like dogs afraid of the whip, looking upward.

MacVickers glimpsed a dark tentacled

shape on the catwalk above, just before the shattering electricity coursed through him. He screamed, once. And then Birek moved.

He struck Loris and Pendleton and the blue-sheathed Earthman out of the way like children. His left leg took MacVickers behind the knees in the same instant that his right hand pushed MacVickers' face.

MacVickers fell heavily on his back, screaming at the contact of the metal floor. Then Birek sprawled over him, shielding his body with the bulk of his own.

The awful shocking pain was lessened. Lying there, looking up into Birek's pale eyes, MacVickers made his twitching lips say, "Why?"

Birek smiled. "The current doesn't hurt much any more. And I want you for myself—to break."

MacVickers drew a deep, shuddering breath and smiled back, the lines deep in his lean cheeks.

HE had no clear memories of that shift. Heat and motion and strangling air, and Janu coughing with a terrible, steady rhythm, his own hands trying to guide the oil can. Toward the end of the time he fainted, and it was Birek who carried him up the ladder.

He had no way of knowing how long after that he came to. There was no time in that little hell. The first thing he noticed, with the hair-trigger senses of a man trained to ships, that the motion of the room was different.

He sat up straight on the bunk where Birek had laid him. "The tidal wave," he said, over a quick stab of fear. "What . . ."

"We ride it out," said Loris bitterly. "We always have."

MacVickers knew the Jovian Moons pretty well. Remembering the tremendous tides and winds caused by the gravitational pull of Jupiter, he shuddered. There was no solid earth on Io, nothing but mud. And the extraction plant, from the feel of it, was a hollow bell sunk under it, perfectly free.

It had to be free. No mooring cable made could stand the pull of a Jupiter-tide.

"One thing about it," said Pendleton with quiet viciousness. "It makes the bloody Jovies seasick."

Janu the Martian made a cracked, harsh



laugh. "So they keep a weak current on us all the time." His hatchet-face was drawn, his yellow cat-eyes lambent in the dim light.

The men sprawled on their bunks, not talking much. Birek sat on the end of his, watching MacVickers with his pale still eyes. There was a tightness in the room.

It was coming. They were going to break him now, before he hurt them. Break him, or kill him.

MacVickers wiped the sweat from his face and said, "I'm thirsty."

Pendleton pointed to a thing like a horse-trough against the bulkhead. His eyes were tired and very sad. Loris was scowling at his stained and faintly filmed feet.

There wasn't much water in the trough. What there was was brackish and greasy. MacVickers drank and splashed some on his face and body. He saw that he was already stained with the mud. It wouldn't wash off.

The dying Earthman whispered, "There is food also."

MacVickers looked at the basket of spongy synthetic food, and shook his head.

The floor dipped and swung. There was a frightening, playful violence about it, like the first soft taps of a tiger's paw. Loris looked up at the glass roof with the black shapes beyond.

"They get the pure air," he said. "Our ventilator pipes are only a few inches wide, lest we crawl up through them."

Pendleton said, rather loudly, "The swine breathe through the skin, you know. All their sense organs, sight and hearing . . ."

"Shut up," snarled Janu. "Stop talking for time."

The sprawled men on the bunks drew themselves slowly tight, breathing hard and deep in anticipation. And Birek rose.

MacVickers faced them, Birek and the rest. There was no lift in his heart. He was cold and sodden, like a chuted ox watching the pole-axe fall. He said, with a bitter, savage quiet,

"You're a lot of bloody cowards. You, Birek. You're scared of the death creeping over you, and the only way you can forget the fear is to make someone else suffer.

"It's the same with all of you. You have to trample me down to your own level, break me for the sake of your souls as much as your bodies."

He looked at the numbers of them, at Birek's huge impervious bulk and his great fists. He touched his silver collar, remembering the agony of the shock through it.

"And I will break. You know that, damn you."

He gave back three paces and set his feet. "All right. Come on, Birek. Let's get it over with."

THE Venusian came toward him across the heaving floor. Loris still looked at his feet and Pendleton's eyes were agonized. MacVickers wiped his hands across his buttocks. The palms were filmed and slick with oil from the can he had handled.

There was no use to fight. Birek was twice his size, and he couldn't be hurt anyway. The diamond-sheathe even screened off the worst of the electric current, being a non-conductor.

That gave the dying men an advantage. But even if they had spirit enough left by that time to try anything, the hatches were still locked tight by air-pressure and the sheer numbers of their suffering mates would pull them down. Also, the Jovies were as strong as four men.

Non-conductor. Sheathed skin. Birek's shoulders tensing for the first blow. Sweat trying to break through the film of oil on his palms, the slippery feel of his hands as he clenched them.

Birek's fist lashed out. MacVickers dodged under it, looking for an opening, dreading the useless agony of impact. The bell lurched wildly.

A guard moved abruptly overhead. The motion caught MacVickers' eye. Something screamed sharply in his head: Pendleton's voice saying, "They breathe through the skin. All their sense organs . . ."

He sensed rather than saw Birek's fist coming. He twisted, enough to take the worst of it on his shoulder. It knocked him halfway across the deck. And then the current came on.

It was weak, but it made him jerk and twitch. He scrambled up on the pitching deck and started to speak. Birek was coming again, leisurely, smiling. Then, quite suddenly, the hatch cover clanged open,

signalling the change of the shifts.

MacVickers stood still for a second. Then he laughed, a queer little chuckle, and made a rush for the hatch.

### III

HE went down it with Birek's hand brushing past his head. Men yelled and cursed. He trampled on them ruthlessly. The ones lower down fell off the ladder to avoid his feet.

There was a clamor up above. Hands grabbed at him. He lashed out, kicking and butting. His rush carried him through and out across the pit, toward the space between the end points of the horseshoe circuit.

He slowed down, then. The guards had noticed the scuffle. But it seemed to be only the shift changing, and MacVickers looked like a man going peacefully for oil.

Peacefully. The blood thundered in his head, he was cold, and the skin of his back crawled. Men shoved and swore back by the ladder. He went on, not too fast, fighting the electric shiver in his brain.

Fuel and lubricating oils were brought up, presumably from tanks in a still lower level, by big pressure pumps. All three sets of pumps, intake, outlet, and oil, worked off the same compressed-air unit.

He set the lubricating-oil pump going and rattled cans into place. The men of his shift were straggling out from the ladder, twitching from the light current, scared, angry, but uncertain.

There was a subtle change in the attitude of the European guards. Their movements were sluggish, faintly uncertain. MacVickers grinned viciously. Seasick. They'd be sicker—if they didn't get him too soon.

The surging pitch of the bell was getting worse. The tide was rising, and the mud was playing with the bell like a child throwing a ball. Nausea began to clutch at MacVickers' stomach.

The pressure-gage on the pump was rising. He let it rise, praying, his grey-green eyes hot and bright. Going with the motion of the deck, he sprawled over against the intake pumps.

He spun the wheel on the pressure-control as far as it would go. A light wrench, chained so that it could not be thrown, lay

at his feet. He picked it up, his hand jerking and tingling, and began to work at the air-pipe coupling.

Hands gripped his shoulder suddenly, slewing him around. The yellow eyes of Janu the Martian glared into his.

"What are you doing here, Earthman? This is my station."

Then he saw the pressure gauge. He let out a keening wail, cut short by the crunch of MacVickers' fist on his mouth. MacVickers whirled and swung the wrench.

The loose coupling gave. Air burst whistling from the pipe, and the rhythm of the pumps began to break.

But Janu's cry had done it. Men were pelting toward him, and the guards were closing in overhead.

MacVickers flung himself bodily on the short hose of the oil-pump.

Birek, Loris, Pendleton, the dying Earthman, the hard faces behind them. The guards were manning the shockers. Up in the control boxes black tentacles were flashing across banks of switches. He had to work fast, before they cut the pressure.

Birek was ahead of the others, very close. MacVickers gave him the oil-stream full in the face. It blinded him. Then the nearest shocker came on, focussed expertly on MacVickers.

He shut his teeth hard, whimpering through them, and turned the hard forced stream of oil into the hoarsely shrieking blast from the open pipe.

Oil sprayed up in a heavy, blinding fog. Burning, shuddering agony shook MacVickers, but he held his hose, his feet braced wide, praying to stand up long enough.

The catwalks were hidden in the oily mist. The ventilating blowers caught it, thrusting it across the whole space. MacVickers yelled through it, his voice hardly recognizable as human.

"You, out there! All of you. This is your chance. Are you going to take it?"

Something fell, close by, with a heavy thrashing thud. Something black and tentacled and writhing, covered with a dull film.

MacVickers laughed, and the laughter was less human than the voice.

"Cowards!" he cried. "All right. I'll do it all myself."

Somebody yelled, "They're dying. Look!" There was another heavy thud. The hot strangling fog roiled with hidden motion. MacVickers gasped and retched and shuddered helplessly. He was going to drop the hose in a minute. He was going to fall down and scream.

If they stepped the power up one more notch, he was going to fall down and die. Only they were dying too, and forgetting about power.

It seemed a static eternity to MacVickers, but it had all happened in the space of a dozen heartbeats. There were yells and shouts and a sort of animal tumult in the thick haze. Suddenly Pendleton's voice rang out of it.

"MacVickers! I'm with you, man! You others, listen. He's giving us the break we needed. Don't let him down!"

And Janu screamed, "No! He's killed the guards, but there are more. They'll fry us from the control boxes if we help him."

The pressure was dropping in the pipe as the power cut out. There was a last hiss, a spurt of oily spray, then silence. MacVickers dropped the hose.

Janu's voice went on, sharp and harsh with fear. "They'll fry us, I tell you. We'll lie here and jerk and scream until we're crazy. I'm going to die. I know it. But I won't go through that, for nothing! I'm going back by the ladder and pray they won't notice me."

More sounds, more tumult. Men suddenly torn between hope and abject terror. MacVickers said wearily into the fog,

"If you help me, we can win the war for our worlds. Destroy this bell, start the Jovium working, destroy Io—victory for us. And if you don't, I hope you fry here and in Hell afterward."

They wavered. MacVickers could hear their painful breathing, ragged with the emotion in them. Some of them started toward the sound of Pendleton's voice.

Janu made an eerie wailing sound, like a hurt cat, and went for him.

**M**ACVICKERS started to help, but the current froze him to the metal floor. He strained, feeling his nerves, his brain dissolving in a shuddering fire. He knew why the others had broken so soon. The current did things to you, inside.

He couldn't see what was happening. The heavy mist choked his eyes, his throat, his nostrils. The pitching of the bell was a nightmare thing. Men thrashed and struggled and cursed.

So he had killed the guards. So what. There were still the control boxes. If they didn't rush them before the oil settled, they wouldn't have a chance.

Why not give up? Let himself dissolve into the blackness he was fighting off?

A great pale shape came striding through the mist toward him. Birek. This was it, then. Well, he'd had his moment of fun. His fists came up in a bland, instinctive gesture.

Birek laughed. The current made him jerk only a little, in his thin diamond sheathe. He bunched his shoulders and reached out.

MacVickers felt himself ripped clear of the floor. In a second he was out of focus of the shocker and the pain was gone. He came nearest to fainting then, but Birek's huge hand shook him by the hair and Birek's voice shouted,

"Tell 'em, little man! Tell 'em it's better to die quick, now, than go mad with fear."

"Come on!" yelled Pendleton. "Here's our chance to show we're still men. Hurry up, you sons!"

MacVickers looked at the Venusian's face. The terrible frozen fear was gone from his eyes. He wanted to die, now, quickly, fighting for vengeance.

The gray, pinched face of Loris loomed abruptly out of the fog. It was suddenly young again, and the smile was genuine. He said,

"Let's teach 'em to mind, Birek. MacVickers, I . . ." He shook his head, looking away. "You know."

"I know. Hurry up with it."

Pendleton's voice burst out of the fog, triumphantly. Janu crouched on the heaving deck, bleeding and whimpering. MacVickers yelled,

"Who's with me? We're going to take the control boxes. Who wants to be a hero?"

Birek laughed and threw him bodily up onto the catwalk overhead. Most of the men came forward then. The three or four that were left looked at the Martian and followed.

Birek helped them up onto the catwalk. They were moving, now. It took only a few seconds. MacVickers divided them into two groups.

"You men that are sheathed go first, to help block the charge. It'll be your job to take the Jovies out of the way. Quick, before this fog settles enough so they can see to focus on us."

They split up, running along the walk that connected with the control boxes, hurdling the bodies of Jovians suffocated in oil. Presently the glassite door loomed before them.

Birek and the dying Earthman led MacVickers' party. The Venusian wrenched open the door. And MacVickers felt his heart stop.

There were three Europeans instead of one. The guards had come down from above.

"Get them out here," he said. "Out into the oil."

A wave of shuddering agony tossed through him. The Jovies were using their powerful hand-tubes. Only the glassite walls partially protected them.

The fog began to whip past him. He groaned, thinking that it was going. And then he put his head in his hands and wept with incredulous, thankful joy.

The oily mist was being sucked into the box by powerful ventilators. MacVickers remembered Loris saying, "They get the pure air. Our ventilator tubes are only a few inches wide."

He laughed. The bell swooped sickeningly. Somewhere off in the fog he heard screams and shouts and Pendleton's voice roaring triumph.

He thought, "We never could have done it if the tide hadn't come and made the Jovies seasick."

He laughed again. It tickled him that seasickness should lose a war.

#### IV

THEY went in and up the ladders into the sealed storage space next the convict quarters. There was a huge cylinder of lead suspended over the mouth of the duct from the extractor.

"They must collect the stuff when they bring oil and supplies," said Loris. "Well,

MacVickers, what happens to us now?"

MacVickers looked at them, the lines deep in his face. "We all agree, don't we, that there's no hope of escape? If we wait until the next supply ship comes and try to take it, we lose the chance of doing—well, call it our duty if you want to. That is, to wreck their only source of the explosive that's winning the war for them.

"I think you know," he added, "what our chances of taking that ship would be, without offensive weapons or any protection against theirs. It would only mean a return to this slavery, if they didn't kill us all outright."

His grey-green eyes were somber, deeply bright.

"It comes down to this. Shall we turn this bell into a disintegrator bomb, setting the Jovium free to destroy its own and every other metallic atom in the mud, or shall we gamble our worlds on the slim chance of saving our necks?"

Loris looked down at the deck and said softly, "Why should we worry about our necks, MacVickers? You've saved our souls."

"Agreed, then, all you men?"

Birek looked them over. "The man who refuses will have no neck to save," he said.

There was no disagreement.

MacVickers turned to the leaden cylinder. It was fixed to the duct by a plastic-lined, lead-sheathed collar. There was an arrangement whereby a plug could be driven into the open mouth of the filled cylinder without spilling a grain of the stuff.

MacVickers reached up and loosed the apparatus that held the cylinder upright. It fell over with a shattering crash. A palely glowing powder puffed out, settling over the adjacent metal.

MacVickers had one second of terror. An eerie bluish light grew, throwing faces into strong relief. Pendleton, praying silently. Loris, smiling. The blue-sheathed Earthman with closed eyes, his face a mask of peace. The others, facing a death they understood and welcomed. All of them, thinking of three little worlds that could go on living their own lives.

Birek grinned at him. "I'm glad you ran away," he whispered.

MacVickers grinned back.

# THE RINGERS FIND A COSMIC NEST



"IF I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE, PA, I'D SAY THAT PLANETOID WAS HATCHING."

# PERIL OF THE BLUE WORLD

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

**The First Earth Expedition was the scouting force of the conquering Martians. But conditions were totally different from those expected, and science was of no value—for on Earth were "beings" that weapons could not fight.**

*Illustrated by Graef*

**T**HERE are those who have criticized the wisdom of the members of the First Earth Expedition in returning to Mars so precipitately, without completing the observations and explorations which it had been intended they should make. For some time now, we who were with the Expedition and knew the real reason for that return have chosen to ignore these few but noisy individuals; but latterly some of the hot-headed younger generation, but lately out of the egg and unwilling to trust to the wisdom of their elders, have begun to talk of launching a second expedition to the Blue Planet.

Therefore, I, Shapplo with the Long Proboscis, interpreter to the First Expedition, have been commissioned by the crew of the Earth Rocket to tell the full and unexpurgated story of our adventures on Earth, and the reasons for our contention that the planet must forever remain closed to Martian colonization.

I will pass over the details of the interplanetary voyage, which consists chiefly of scientific data and figures not calculated to interest the average reader. Suffice it to say that the Earth Rocket, with the twenty-three members of its crew alive and intact, came safely to rest on the crest of a gently-swelling hill in the midst of an island in the northern hemisphere of Earth. This island is located by our astronomers as 1-2-2-(1) North, but is called by its inhabitants, Engeland or Britannia.

We landed in the southern portion of this island, on a hilltop as before stated; and, after conditioning our lungs and wearing gravity belts against Earth's dense atmosphere and correspondingly strong gravity, we threw open the exit ports

and trooped out, led by our captain, Tutwa with the Crooked Ears, our second in command, Ikleek from Gnoxwid, and myself; also, immediately behind us, came our zoologist, Zesmo Who Fell in the Canal when an Infant.

The first thing noticed by all of us, but particularly by Zesmo Who Fell in the Canal, was the riparian-appearing profusion of Earthly life which at once displayed itself. Plants of every size and shape, invariably green in color but bearing blossoms of all shades, covered the hillside and all of the rolling landscape that was visible from our point of vantage. Among the leaves and flowers fluttered bright-colored objects which we soon perceived, with great surprise, to be living creatures.

"What a planet!" exclaimed the captain philosophically. "Even the lower animals can fly; what then may we expect of the higher creatures, the intelligent races?"

"You'll notice, however," said Zemo, who had in the meantime succeeded in capturing one of these aerial dancers, "that they fly entirely without artificial aids. It is made possible by the dense atmosphere of Earth."

**A**S we moved forward among the thick and moderately lofty vegetation, small, furred, four-legged creatures leaped out of the underbrush and scampered rapidly away. Using ray-guns at low power, we paralyzed several of these; but, after close examination, we were forced to conclude that we must look further for the intelligent inhabitants of the planet.

"It's quite possible that there isn't any





*Zesmo's right tentacle whipped up; there was the sharp crackle of energy in the air; sparks leaped about the thing's metal joints.*

intelligent race," said Zesmo gloomily. "If they were very bright, I should think they'd have crossed space to Mars before now."

"Don't expect too much of the poor Earthman, Zesmo," retorted Ikleek. "Remember that our own race discovered space travel only three generations ago, and that ours is the first rocket powerful enough to dare Earth's gravitational field. Due to the high velocity of escape,

the development of space travel by Earthman would be very much retarded. They might have a high civilization and never get off the ground."

"Aerial flight should be easy," argued Zesmo. "Look at even those ignorant little—"

He was interrupted by a shrill shout from one of the crew. One and all, we turned toward the sound, and saw him hastening toward us through the trees

as fast as Earth's tremendous gravity would let him, waving his tentacles and glowing with terror.

"A monster!" he sputtered. "A metal monster!"

We hastily adjusted our ray-guns to full power, and awaited anxiously the onslaught of whatever formidable being might come against us. We had not long to wait, for in a moment we saw approaching among the trees a fantastic creature.

For some moments we gaped foolishly at the thing before we realized that it was actually a compound monster—two animals in one, so to speak. Except that one was not an animal, but evidently a machine!

The Earth-monster had not yet seen us; and at this juncture I took the opportunity to hastily scribble some notes which I very shortly regretted. However, to illustrate the fact that anyone may make mistakes and that even the most apparent truths may be misinterpreted, I will here reproduce what I wrote:

"The intelligent inhabitants of Earth somewhat resemble us in the possession of four limbs, two eyes, and two elongated protuberances which are very likely ears. The sensory organs are mostly located on, or about, the front of the head. The feet are sheathed in horny coverings which may be either natural or artificial. The caudal appendage is of considerable length and bears long dense hairs, thus differing from the rest of the body, over which the hairy covering is short and flat-lying. No real proboscis is present, but the head is much elongated in front, with the snout directed downward. . . ."

Enough of this. At least, tremendous as my error was, it was at the time shared by all the others present.

The animal above described formed the lower portion of the compound being which confronted us. Mounted astride of it was a gleaming metal creature, constructed on the same lines, but with jointed arms and legs of metal, without a tail, and seated erect instead of going slavishly on all fours. In one hand it grasped a long pole with a sharp metal point, and other accouterments which might be weapons were girded about it.

"A robot!" ejaculated the Captain. He had jumped to the same natural conclusion as the rest of us.

"What do you say to an intelligent race now, Zesmo?" hissed Ikdeek. "Obviously the Earthmen were *too* intelligent. They built a high civilization and were enslaved by their own machines!"

"Perhaps we Martians are destined to free this oppressed race from ignoble servitude!" exclaimed Zesmo. "If we can just paralyze and capture the machine—" He began adjusting his ray-gun to low power.

THE creature may have heard our voices, muffled as they were by the heavy air. At any rate, it suddenly turned toward us, displaying an expressionless metal face with a curious grille arrangement in front; and, recovering in a trice from its evident astonishment, it drove feet armed with dagger-sharp points into the flanks of its mount, and came galloping toward us. As it came it lowered its long spear, with the obvious intention of impaling upon it one or more of our number.

Zesmo's right tentacle whipped up with his ray-gun; there was a sharp crackle of invisible energy in the air, blue sparks leaped about the thing's metal joints, and both it and its mount toppled heavily to the earth and lay in an inert heap.

We approached them with caution—none too cautiously, as it developed, because abruptly the robot stirred and scrambled dizzily to its feet. Its metal sheathing had absorbed most of the ray-gun's merely paralyzing energy. With a swift, practiced motion, it drew from its side a long, straight, sharp blade, which I subconsciously identified as a primitive weapon operating on the wedge principle, even as I was raising and aiming my ray-gun.

Taking cognizance of the fact that we would much prefer to capture the machine in an undamaged state, but also of the fact that unless steps were taken it would very shortly hack me into small pieces, I aimed at the upraised weapon and pressed the firing button. The ray, at full power, struck the blade, which glowed red-hot and partially fused. The robot dropped it with a sharp exclamation.

tion of uncertain meaning, probably expressing considerable annoyance.

In the meantime Zesmo had stepped to close range, and now he gave the metal man a considerably augmented dosage of the ray. With a hiss and crackle, the robot collapsed and gave us no more trouble.

Zesmo had begun to examine the prostrate animal upon which it had ridden, with a view to resuscitation, then Ikleek, who had turned his attention to the robot, abruptly straightened up and began to rock to and fro in amusement.

"Would you mind telling me what you're so happy about?" inquired Zesmo with pardonable acerbity.

"Merely that we've all made a *very* silly mistake," gurgled Ikleek, recovering a portion of his composure. He flipped a contemptuous tentacle toward the animal which Zesmo had been examining. "Intelligent creature, bah!" He began to rock back and forth uncontrollably once more.

"Explain yourself," ordered Captain Tutwa sternly.

For answer, the second in command bent over the "robot," and, wrenching off its metal head-covering, revealed the face of an unconscious living being.

I need not describe the Earthman, since the form and appearance of this race have become familiar to all Martians from the photographs and descriptions which we brought back from Earth. I will only mention that this specimen was a male, and consequently was rather hairy about the lower portion of the face as well as on the top and back of the head.

Zesmo made no comment, but popped his eyes in and out of his head at an expressive rate.

"Here's your Earthman!" chortled Ikleek gleefully, tapping on the creature's metal chest-protector. "He's only wearing armor, a great deal like a space-suit."

"Maybe he'll die if you leave his helmet off," exclaimed Zesmo in alarm.

I picked up the helmet and examined it. "His armor isn't airtight," I informed the company. "It must be worn for some other reason."

We were all considerably puzzled by

this, and determined to revive the Earthman as soon as possible, in order to question him on this subject and others. With some difficulty we carried him back to the ship.

UNABLE to use drugs, due to the possibility of essential differences between Earthly and Martian chemical constitutions, we were forced to resort to purely physical means for his resuscitation; but we were very shortly successful to the extent that the Earthman stirred, opened his lidded eyes, and sat up groggily—then, seeing us crowding about him curiously with waving tentacles and proboscides, uttered an insane yell and attempted to leave the ship at once.

It was with much difficulty that we succeeded in overpowering the frantic Earthman without his breaking the glass oxygen helmet which we had placed over his head to allow him to breathe air at the normal Earthly pressure of between fourteen and fifteen pounds to the square inch. With the aid of a dozen members of the crew, however, we eventually subdued him, not without ourselves sustaining some damage. The tip of one left tentacle was somehow broken off in the scuffle, and by the time I had located the fragment and fastened it back on with medicated adhesive to facilitate healing, the Earthman had been strapped to a table and the telepathor set up.

Since I was interpreter for the expedition, due to my training in the arts and sciences of telepathy, psychology, and linguistics, I, at once, took charge, checked over the apparatus, and began to experiment with a view to discovering the vibration frequency of the Earthman's mind. At last I found it, surprisingly far down in the scale. The Earthmen have exceedingly slow minds, which do not allow them to think quickly in an emergency; this, however, does not prevent them from acting quickly.

Having finally attuned the transformer of the telepathor to step down my mental frequency to the Earthman's level, I succeeded in entering into telepathic communication with him. I will not attempt to reproduce this conversation in words, but will merely give the gist of it, which

was about all that I grasped at the time, having no familiarity with Earthly idioms of thought.

This Earthman's name, I gathered, was Sir Henry de Long, the initial "Sir" being some sort of title of more or less vague meaning. He was also a "knight"; this, too, was an honor of some sort, and was intimately connected with the wearing of a considerable quantity of heavy iron and the possession of a horse—the animal upon which the Earthman had been mounted when we first made his acquaintance. In addition to his knight-hood, he was an "Englishman," which he also appeared to consider a distinction. On further questioning, it developed that being an Englishman meant having been born in this island of Engeland; I was unable to perceive why this accident should be a cause for personal pride, but concluded that there must be some reason buried deep in Earthly psychology.

When I inquired about his armor, I discovered that it had something to do with his being a knight; furthermore, he seemed to be proud of the armor. In fact, this remarkable individual was proud of almost everything connected with himself. This is one of the characteristics of a certain class of Earthmen, to which this specimen belonged; we discovered later that the vast majority of the race is educated to a becoming humility, while a limited group is allowed to consider itself out of the ordinary and infinitely better than the rest. This is quite proper, of course; those who are superior should be accorded fitting distinction. During our brief stay on Earth, however, we were unable to ascertain the basis on which the superiority of this class is determined.

I succeeded in assuring de Long of our kindly intentions toward him, and obtained his promise not to make trouble if released. Considering the high respect in which this queer fellow held himself, I was reasonably certain that he would refrain from breaking his "word of honor."

I learned also that de Long's home was not far from our present location. On due consideration, we decided to move the ship to this place and gain an

opportunity to observe these people in their natural habitat.

THE Earth Rocket, accordingly, lifted and flew several miles to the east, landing near the castle, or great fortress-like building of stone, which was our guest's usual habitation. The Earthman was overwhelmed by the actuality of flight; we learned, when he finally came out of his daze, that artificial flying was here believed impossible.

We were somewhat startled by the sensation produced by our appearance on the scene; of course, these people had never seen a flying machine, but their excitement seemed to us wholly disproportionate. However, it is a characteristic of Earthman psychology to believe anything you have never seen or heard of impossible, and accordingly to be very much alarmed when it actually appears. After we had entered the castle with de Long in our midst, we were disagreeably surprised to learn that on observing our approach the people in the fortress had prepared quantities of boiling oil and heavy stones with the idea of dropping them on us when we passed under the walls, and had only been deterred by the presence of their chieftain.

It was not a pleasant thought.

Nevertheless, after their terror had been dissipated by our pacificatory policy, these people became childishly curious, and wherever any one of us went, he could be sure of a crowd of gaping Earthmen following on his heels to observe his every action.

Zesmo was a bit disappointed by the low state of advancement in which we found the Earthmen. They have no electricity and no self-powered machines; they depend entirely upon muscle, either their own—which is far from inconsiderable in proportion to their intellect—or that of their various slave animals. In some things they display striking ingenuity, in other remarkable obtusity.

During our several days' stay near the castle of de Long, Zesmo and our sociologist, Plagu Long Legs, gathered an immense body of data on the life and characteristics of the Earthmen, which may be found in almost any public library in more or less condensed form. There-

fore I will avoid going into it here.

So far, we had found no great danger on Earth, and no hint of the horrors which must forever prohibit exploration of the planet. One day, however, when I was pursuing an investigation of their socialistic society in a telepathor conversation with de Long, he happened to mention that one of the occupations of a good knight was killing dragons.

"Dragons?" I inquired, recording the word in my notebook.

"Wot ye not what dragons be?" exclaimed de Long, with raised eyebrows—an expression of mild surprise with the Earthmen. "A dragon is a huge beast, the greatest on the Earth. From its mouth and nostrils, it breathes flame and smoke, so that but to approach it is deadly peril."

"Uh—where do these brutes live?" I wanted to know, somewhat apprehensively.

"There are not many in Engeland in these latter days, St. George and many another valiant champion having harried them full sore, slaying many and putting the fear of God into the rest. But in Ireland and other lands many remain and are the terror of all men living."

THIS was a bit of a shock, to say the least. We had expected dangers on Earth, naturally; but no such fearsome beasts as de Long described. Our ray guns might prove quite ineffective against these terrible animals.

"Are these the most dangerous creatures on Earth?" I inquired, with some hesitancy.

De Long leaned back and emitted a series of explosive sounds indicative of amusement.

"Far from it," he declared. "For though dragons be vasty and terrible, yet are there other creatures no whit less perilous to mortal men, and some far more so. We have many fiends of divers sorts even here in England, some of which are friends to man and hold no malice, but the most of which are ill-natured and lose no opportunity to do a mischief. They say that when the rovers came from Norway in the days of the good King Aelfred, they brought with them in their long black galleys, together with many a thirsty spear, the

devils and hobgoblins that were their pagan gods; and that these have stayed after them and are yet the foes of all true Englishmen."

"We have seen no such creatures," said I doubtfully.

"Nay, for men rarely see them. For the most part, they do their evil deeds by night; and many are able to become invisible at their will. And some take divers forms: such are the werewolves, which are by day men, by night ravenous man-eating beasts.

This was decidedly discouraging. I was still not sure, though, that de Long was not merely jesting.

"Are these things likely to be dangerous to Martians?" I demanded.

"I know not—but here in Engeland, as I have said before, there are much fewer of these fiends than elsewhere," he reassured me.

I glanced nervously about the room. "Is it—is it possible that an invisible fiend might be present even here?" I knew that our scientists had produced invisibility in the laboratory, but it was hard to believe—

De Long nodded gravely. "Quite possible," he affirmed, adding sententiously, "Even walls have ears; speak of the Devil and his imps will appear."

"Excuse me," I said falteringly. "I just remembered an important engagement—"

I switched off the telepathor, gathered it up and made a hasty exit. I wanted to consult with Captain Tutwa.

The captain listened with skepticism to my retelling of de Long's account of the dangers of the Blue Planet.

"Bah!" he said, when I had finished. "The Earthman was probably lying, for some reason or other. These fellows have strange motives."

"But why should he tell me such tales?" I persisted. "He seemed perfectly serious. And if such dangers *do* exist on Earth—"

"The motive becomes perfectly plain to me!" exclaimed the captain, snapping a tentacle in the air. "By telling us of imaginary dangers, the Earthman intends to frighten us away and preserve his sovereignty over the planet."

"That sounds like a plausible reason," I admitted. "But—if he is telling the

truth, we are risking Martian lives every moment we remain here! We should at least check the facts."

"Well . . ." The captain turned blue with concentration. "The Council, in chartering the Earth Expedition, expressed a fear that the planet might prove unavailable for colonization, due to possible inimical life forms. It's so much nearer the Sun, and so moist, that we had anticipated just such a canalbank jungle as does exist; and it's possible that the pressure of evolutionary competition might develop strange and fearful creatures. . . . But, remember that we haven't seen even one of these 'fiends.'"

"De Long said that a great many of them are invisible."

"Hmm!" said the captain. "Of course, that's within the bounds of possibility, though not of probability; but before we came here I'd have said flying animals were improbable. We had best investigate."

"Eh?"

"It's simple. We'll merely put de Long under the lie detector."

I WAS struck by the beautiful simplicity of this idea, which should have been right in my province.

"I leave it to you to maneuver de Long into a position where we can use the detector without his knowledge," said the captain.

"Very well," I said joyfully,

It was not difficult to get de Long aboard the ship; he had never had a chance to satisfy his curiosity concerning it. I showed him through several of the cabins without doing anything to arouse his suspicions, and finally got him seated within the effective radius of the lie detector.

"Er—I've been wondering about—about those werewolves you were telling me of, Sir Henry," I improvised. "Just what are their habits?"

"They are a dangerous sort of demon," replied the Earthman readily. "By day they appear to be ordinary men, save that they may be distinguished by the first finger of the right hand being longer than the second; but in the dead of night the craving for human flesh

comes upon them, they grow hairy, their nails become claws and their jaws lengthen, and they are wolves. They may not be slain by any weapon while in the beast form, but must be taken in human shape."

I quivered in spite of myself. The lie detector indicator had not moved from center—what he was saying must be the dreadful truth!

"Are—are they the worst sort of fiend common around here?" I ventured to ask.

De Long constricted the skin above his eyes judiciously. "The vampire is likewise a direful demon, though little known in these parts," he declared. "It is the soul of an unsanctified corpse, which rises in the night from its grave and goes forth to suck blood and life from living men."

I SPRANG to my feet, unable to remain still any longer. De Long stared. "Is aught amiss?" he exclaimed anxiously.

"No—nothing," I muttered, and the lie detector needle leaped clear against its stop pins. "That is—I rather think we'll be leaving Earth before very long." With lame excuses, we managed to get the Earthman outside.

Captain Tutwa thoroughly agreed with me that we must leave this noxious planet at once, never to return, and that Earth must be declared unfit for Martian colonization. I can solemnly say that the Blue Planet is a veritable inferno; we of Mars will do well to keep clear of it in future interplanetary explorations.

I am sure that you can well see that Earth can never be colonized from Mars, that it must be forever shunned as a plague spot. If any of our hot-headed youth is now so foolhardy as to brave the horrors of that planet of fear, their blood is on their own heads.

In the 75th day of the 242nd year of the invention of the steam engine,

(Signed)

Shapplo with the Long Proboscis, Interpreter, First Earth Expedition.



# The Man From Siykul

By RICHARD WILSON

The Siykulans demanded pay for Myra and Steve's freedom. The price was small—merely the losing of their sanity in the spider's ray-trap.

Illustrated by Graef



"Look," whispered Myra, "he's all over fuzz, like a peach!"

**M**YRA HORN awoke from her nap on the couch in the control room and looked at her husband. He was hunched over the Simplimatic 50-But-

ton control board of their sleek Skypiercer space-launch, peering through the vision shield with a grim intensity.

Myra turned her involuntary smile into

a wifely frown at his muscular back.

"Steve!" she said sharply. "Will you stop chasing that meteor? Aren't you ever going to grow up?"

Steve Horn glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Hush, dear," he grinned. "Papa's in the money."

Myra sat up and smoothed her satin-leather jumper. She looked again at the meteor they were pursuing. "What a funny color!" she exclaimed.

"The Primary Color," said Steve. "It's a flying goldmine. I think we're gaining on it."

"What are you going to do when you catch up with it?"

"Lasso it," replied her husband. "In half an hour," he paused impressively, "—we'll be Horns of plenty."

Myra made a face at his back. "Bless your heart, darling," she said. "If there were another man closer than Jupiter I'd divorce you."

"I'm captain here," said Steve Horn, "with power of life, death and divorce. You'll do no such thing. Grab the key-board while I trip up our quarry."

Myra slipped into his seat while Steve jumped to a boxlike affair that jutted from the floor on a pedestal. It was one of the "accessories optional at slight additional cost" which Myra had insisted they could do without—a Netaction wireless-grapple capable of exerting a magnetic pull on objects up to half a mile distant.

Myra fell into the spirit of the chase. She accelerated their little craft until they were within snaring distance of the meteor.

"Take it easy," advised Steve. "Don't get too close. You might dent it."

He flicked over a switch on the wireless grapple.

"Got it!" he cried triumphantly a moment later.

"How do you know?" demanded Myra. "You can't see any more than I can—and I don't notice any difference."

"Try decelerating," Steve suggested.

Myra cut the motor. There was a silence they hadn't experienced since the start of their trip to Jupiter, more than two weeks before. It was broken almost immediately by a series of less-deep, sonorous staccato bursts from the Retard-rockets in the nose of the ship.

"You're right, Steve. There is a definite forward drag not caused by momentum."

"'Course, I'm right."

"But, Steve," said Myra abruptly, "that can't be gold. Since when has gold been attracted by a magnet?"

He opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again and looked disgusted.

"Oh, well," Myra said after a moment, "don't let go. Maybe we can sell it to a Jovian museum as a rare curio. Probably worth millions!"

"Probably iron pyrite. Probably worth less than twenty bucks. Pfah!" Steve snorted impatiently. "We'll throw it back. We haven't got time to lug museum pieces around the solar system, however scholarly we may be."

"Okay!" Myra pouted prettily.

STEVE flicked the grapple indicator to "off." Nothing happened. The retarding rockets continued to blast vainly away. The gold colored meteor sped before them; their ship followed it inexorably.

"What's the matter?" asked Myra. "Change your mind?"

Steve stared at the fleeting meteor in amazement.

"I let go," he said. He indicated the silent grapple. "Look. It's dead."

"Don't tell me," purred Myra sarcastically, "that you're going to let a little hunk of rock kidnap us."

"Hell of a thing," muttered Steve. "Maybe I used too much power. Maybe the thing's charged with magnetism."

"And exerting an attraction strong enough to affect us—half a mile away?" Suddenly the ship lurched sideways. Myra drew herself erect, rubbing a painful nose. "Now I ask you—is that any way for a full grown meteor to act?"

Steve picked himself off the floor, where the sudden swerve of the ship had thrown him. He joined his wife at the shield. The meteor was twisting and turning like a thing demented. The Skypiercer, in its magnetic grasp, followed the crazy course helplessly.

Steve looked very wise. "Something's wrong. I have a hunch it isn't a meteor."

"Hear! Hear!" applauded Myra. "First it isn't a goldmine. Now it isn't a meteor."

What won't it be next, my profound husband?"

Steve ignored her. He cut off the Re-raderockets. "Save fuel, anyway," he said.

There was another cessation of sound.

The Horns looked at each other in astonishment. They were slowing down! The meteor drifted slowly through space—then stopped.

"Everything," said Myra softly, "is all wacked up. Where is the physics of yesterday?"

Steve was staring open mouthed at the gold colored piece of rock. "Little demons!" he breathed. "It's turning around. It wants to say hello. Isn't that nice! Pad a cell for me, old fruitcake, I feel a spasm coming on."

The "meteor" described a wide arc that brought it to the side of the Horns' ship, now halted in space. It circled them a few times; then stopped and bobbed up and down in a friendly manner.

"It wants to play," said Steve wearily. "Go shake hands with it."

"If it's a ship," said Myra practically, "it's done a very good job of disguising itself. There aren't any rocket tubes, or ports, or landing gear, as far as I can see."

Their golden companion began to whirl rapidly, like a miniature planet. Above it, English characters appeared against the black curtain of space in lines of fire. They were badly made, and misspelled, but readable.

"GUD MORNIG," they said. "HELO CQ UGH"

"Ugh," said Steve. He put his hands over his eyes and sat down. He moaned. "This," he said, "is too much."

WHEN, in 2021, the government created a Department of Education, it consolidated hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country and introduced robot lecturers. Hundreds of instructors were left without jobs. One of them was Stephen Horn, Professor of American Literature.

He faced no immediate worry, however. His salary had permitted him to save enough to provide for him and his wife for a few years. Myra Horn, more popularly known as Myra Classon, was a nove-

list whose books had received considerable attention—especially in Steve's American Lit classes, where he shamelessly proclaimed her to be one of the greatest living authors.

After a period of futile searching for another professorial position in America or abroad, Steve came bouncing home one day waving a pink Space-Cable form. It had been addressed to him care of his old University, and read:

"IMPERATIVE NEED FOR LIT  
PROF HERE SALARY PHENOMENAL  
STOP WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR  
LOVE TO MYRA  
(Signed) ART WILDER  
UNIVERSITY OF JUPITER"

Art, Myra and Steve were old friends, and had attended the same college. But when Steve and Myra married, Art disappeared. They heard nothing of him for three years, until one day there arrived in the trans-spatial mail a copy of Art's home-town paper, marked at an article lauding Wurtsboro's native son for his successful founding of a university at the booming Earth colony of New City, Jupiter.

The upshot of his message was that, after several more cables, Steve went out and bought a space-launch, fully equipped for travel to high and far off places like the Sun's fifth planet.

The Horns hadn't expected an uneventful trip, having once taken a weekend excursion to the Moon. Myra had a vivid recollection of the things that had happened to them at that time: events including coping with a pyromaniac, an undecided suicide who leaped overboard in a space-suit, and a crackpot mutineer who had tried to enlist their aid in overcoming the captain and setting up an anarchist Utopia on Mars with the thirty-two passengers aboard.

But she had never expected to encounter a talking meteor.

"SHALL we ignore it?" she asked her husband. "Or shall we be civil and chat a while?"

"I wash my hands of the matter," said Steve. "If you want to strike up an acquaintance with every impossibility that comes along, it's up to you."

The meteor was getting impatient. It began to bob up and down again, like a balloon caught in an air current. More letters appeared above it in space.

"HELLO?" it said. "EXTRA EGLISH WHAT?"

"Okay, okay," soothed Myra. "Just a minute."

She tore a page out of a notebook and printed something on it. She held it up to a porthole.

The meteor bounded closer, so that it was almost touching their ship. Now they could see tiny mounds on its surface, about the size of walnuts.

"Good grief!" said Steve. "It's got eyes. Like . . ."

"Like a potato," finished Myra.

The meteor bounced off again and stood stationary for a moment.

"What'd you say?" Steve asked.

"I said, 'I'm a married woman. But stick around.'"

"Fine," said Steve. "Nothing like a little comedy to buck one up in moments fraught with suspense. What's it doing now?"

The meteor was whirling again in a state of industrious agitation. Suddenly it stopped. A white, sticky substance began to pour out of it. As it grew it congealed into something resembling frosted glass, which formed a gigantic bubble, big enough to enclose several ships the size of the Horns.

There was a large opening at one point. The transparent bubble drifted toward them. Before they could move they had entered it through the opening. The meteor-ship followed them, then spurted some more of the gelatine substance, sealing the opening.

A nozzle poked its way through the hull of the golden ship. Through the hull of their ship they could hear a hissing noise. Presently it stopped. The nozzle was withdrawn.

Their neighbor hopped over to them again. One of its "eyes" expanded until it was the size of a basketball, and transparent. More letters of fire, much smaller now, appeared within.

"AIR," they said. "EARTH AIR SAFE OPEN DOOR."

A section of the golden ship dropped. On it stood a creature less than two feet

tall, colored a deep bronze. Vaguely terrestrial in shape, it stood on one thick limb which became its body without widening at what might be called its hips. It terminated below in a ball-shaped foot and above in a shapeless bumpy head, featureless, except that each of the bumps seemed to be an eye. Three arms, of various sizes, each with different joints, extended from its body—one just below the head, in front, one halfway down on its left side and one at what should have been the top of its right thigh.

It was a thoroughly unnerving spectacle.

"My two-headed aunt!" cried Steve. "The side show's in town."

"No remarks," said Myra. "You should see yourself in the morning. But what are we going to do about it?"

"Ask it to tea." He twisted a little wheel on the control board. "I'll have the data in a minute. Maybe the little fella isn't lying. Maybe there is air in the bubble."

"Temperature 72°, humidity 84 percent," announced Steve. "Tomorrow fair, with slowly rising food prices."

"Laugh and you laugh alone," said Myra. "I don't understand it, but do we let him in?"

"Sure. Maybe he can play rummy."

Steve stepped on the treadle that started the motor in the airlock. The lock rumbled slowly outward.

"Steve—" Myra's voice was a little uncertain. "Maybe the instruments aren't working?"

Steve sighed. "I like the way you think of these things just *after* the nick of time. If that were so, we'd be frozen corpses by now. The door's open. It's a little muggy, but that's all."

Now they could see the bronze midget more clearly. He looked no more inviting at close range, being wider and heavier than they had imagined, but what he lacked in looks he made up for in affability. He waved all three arms at them once, like a happy windmill.

Steve waved back. "Nice day," he said.

THE creature left off waving at them and signalled his ship. It drifted closer soundlessly, until the two ships were touching.

"Look," whispered Myra. "He's all over fuzz. Like a peach."

Steve craned his neck to look down at their visitor, who had stepped onto the platform of their ship and seemed to be inspecting their knees with great interest.

Steve squatted down until he was almost on a level with their guest. He held out his hand. The fuzzy one let it overflow in one of his curious three-fingered hands and looked at it critically.

He couldn't tell whether he was being looked at and listened to, or not. The creature's eyes were scattered all over its gold-hair-covered head. Their pupils were hairlike, resembling those of a horse.

A low-pitched hum, rising and falling, ceasing occasionally, came from the three-armed one. It emanated from no particular spot, but surrounded him like an aura.

"No savvy," said Steve. "C'mon. I want to see how you walk."

HE got up and stepped backward. The creature followed, in an effortless, gliding motion. He appeared to have a ball set into a socket of his foot, which, combined with a delicate sense of balance, gave him a wonderful mobility.

Abruptly he turned, gave a little hop to his own craft and disappeared.

"What do you make of that?" Myra asked.

"He just remembered a previous engagement," soothed Steve. "What's the matter, darling—jealous?"

In a moment the creature reappeared, carrying a plain black box, about six inches square.

"I told you he played rummy," said Steve. "Look—he brought chips."

He set the box on the floor and threw back a lid. Inside the lid were three fine wires that ended in buttons. He handed one each to Myra and Steve and took one himself.

"Now," said a metallic voice, "we'll be able to understand each other."

The Horns looked at each other, then at the animate piece of bronze fuzz. At the same time the voice had spoken, there had been the hum they assumed to be his method of communication. Steve's eyebrows shot up in inquiry.

"Does that thing act as a translator?"

As he spoke, a hum came from the box.

"Exactly," said the box, while the bronze one hummed.

"Amazing," murmured Myra. "This should take the place of the self-lighting cigarette. Speaking of which, how about one? We'll be burning up Peach's air, not ours."

"I think we both need one," said Steve. He handed her one, popped one in his own mouth. After looking in vain for a mouth on Peachy, he put the pack back in his pocket. They puffed, and smoke curled from the glow that was suddenly at the end.

Peachy looked at them curiously.

"First," he said, "my name isn't Peachy. It's WalmearFgon. Secondly, what are those?"

"Wal. . . ." Steve made a face. "We'll let it go at Peachy. Secondly, these are cigarettes. Also known as smokes, fags, the White Menace and coffin-nails. They stain your fingers, befoul the atmosphere, use up oxygen, give you bad breath and shorten your life-span."

"Then why do you use them?"

Steve shrugged. "I save cowpons."

Peachy looked blank. But then Peachy had no way of looking otherwise, so Myra said:

"Where do you come from?"

"Siykul." He waved his two free arms vaguely. "Over there."

"He means he's a Martian," explained Steve. "Aren't you, Peachy?"

"No," he said.

"Venerian?"

"No."

"Mercurian, Jovian, Saturnine, Plutonic?"

"No."

"Oh." Steve looked incredulous. "Solar System?"

"Not this one." He pointed, more specifically this time. "That is my home. In your words it is called Bungula, in Centauri. I lived on the second planet, Siykul."

"Pleased to meet you," said Myra. "Now that the formalities are over with, let's get to the point. To what do we owe the pleasure, as we say, of your visit?"

"I have been on a quest," said Peachy.

"I have traveled through several solar systems looking for two subjects for experimentation. All that I visited, however, I found far too intelligent for my purposes. Now, at last, I am successful."

"Wh-at?" said Steve.

"Imagine," said Myra softly. "This little one-legged, three-armed, potato-headed, noseless squirt of fuzz came umteen trillion miles just to insult us. Imagine!"

PEACHY'S home, the second of five planets that circled the sun, Bungula, in the constellation of Centauri, was a world about the size of Mars, but more nearly resembling Earth in every other respect. Seven-eighths of its surface was covered with water. The atmosphere they breathed was essentially Earth air. There were two continents on Siykul, on opposite sides of the globe, as well as minor islands scattered here and there in the seas. The poles were covered with ice the year round.

There were two dominant races on Siykul, one on each continent. According to Peachy, each was covetous of the other's land. His race was young, brilliant, industrious and ingenious. Their technicians, inventors and mechanics were unequalled anywhere in the cosmos, so far as he knew.

Theirs were great cities, factories, ships of the sea, land and air. Buildings stretched scores of tiers into the sky and down into the ground as far again. Rich in minerals and raw materials, their race was one with a brief past, but a promising future.

The other continent, however, was shockingly primitive. Vast forests and jungles stretched from one sea to the other. Aircraft passing overhead could make out only scattered and far apart settlements that might, possibly, house life. There were hundred-mile stretches in which no trace of a living thing could be found. The inhabitants, glimpsed occasionally, were immense, red, spidery things, evidently very savage.

Steve and Myra interrupted Peachy's story long enough to make themselves comfortable on chairs and choose fresh cigarettes.

"About how tremendous are these crea-

tures, compared, say—to me?" asked Steve.

"They're about your size."

"Enormous," admitted Steve to the compact two-footer. "Go on."

Peachy didn't seem to be made for any position other than an upright one. He shifted his communication wire to another hand and continued:

"A few years ago my people began to realize that our continent would not be big enough to hold us very much longer. We are already utilizing every available inch of space in our country and we must have more room, otherwise many of our people will starve.

"Spurred on thus, we quickly built a small fleet of extraplanetary ships to seek habitation on other worlds. The fleet became useless when it left our atmosphere, and the eight ships crashed. But we had profited by our mistakes, and the next fleet successfully navigated the upper air."

Steve looked incredulous. "Do you mean to say those were the first space ships you ever made?"

"Yes," said the Siykulan simply. "We had never needed them before."

Steve whistled.

"Look," said Myra. "What was the idea of dashing all over the Solar System for this elbow room, when you have all you needed on the other continent?"

"We had no way of getting there," said Peachy.

"Nonsense," said Steve, "you just finished telling us about your airships, and boats and marvelous inventions—"

"You don't understand," said their tiny guest patiently. "There was no *physical* hardship involved. We had no trouble flying over the continent, or approaching it from the ocean. But the moment we tried to land, from the sea or air, disaster overtook us."

"What sort of disaster?" asked Myra.

"Insanity."

EVERY so often, it seemed, the Siykulans sent an expedition to their neighboring continent. And once in a while—not so often—a member or two of the expedition would return, to babble crazily of monsters and blackness and throbbings in their heads.

They had lost some of their best minds



that way before they gave up. Except for one further experiment. They outfitted a remote control ship with an assortment of animals and sent this to the neighboring continent, accompanied by a ship manned by a higher-order Siykulan who directed the animal craft without himself going close enough to the other continent to be affected.

The animal ship was landed while the controlling vessel hovered high above to note reactions. After a time, the first ship took off and the two sped back to Siykul.

Tests previously conducted had proven that animals could be made insane by inaudible notes of music and by scientifically-induced frustration. But these animals had not been affected by their exposure to whatever it was that had driven their more intelligent neighbors into idiocy.

It was therefore assumed that the malignant aura which hung over the green continent could affect only the brainy, possibly because the aura was electrical in nature and in some way short-circuited the brain through thought, which is another form of electricity.

Hence the pilgrimage of the little Siykulan. Provided with what might best be described as a brainmeter, or intelligence-tester, he had roamed the spaceways in his golden ship searching for a race with a modicum of intelligence, but not too much.

Steve put out his cigarette.

"It's been a very interesting story, Peachy," he said, "if not very complimentary, but I'm sorry we can't oblige you. We have a date on Jupiter."

"Yes," said Myra. "We're sorry to have to chase you out like this, but we must be getting on. Drop in to see us again any time you're in the neighborhood."

Although there was no change in the demeanor of the Siykulan, or in the inflection of the voice that came from him through the black box, he seemed to them suddenly stern and, ridiculous though it seemed in one his size, awesome.

"You must do what I say. You don't seem to understand that upon you rests the fate of five hundred million people. . . ."

". . . like you," said Myra scornfully.

"Like me," said Peachy proudly. "They

are depending on me, and I shall not fail them. You need have no fear of not being compensated—"

"It's not compensation," said Steve. "I don't know what your life span is, but ours is roughly a hundred years, and we aren't anxious to waste any of it on a trip to Centauri."

"So!" said Peachy triumphantly, "since that is your only objection, you will—"

"It's *not* our only objection," said Myra, but Peachy went on inexorably.

"—you will be glad to know that we are already in the atmosphere of my planet."

"Don't be silly," said Steve. Then, uncertainly, "We couldn't be."

"You shall see," said Peachy. He dropped his wire and glided to his own ship. He returned in a moment and with a grandiloquent motion of his hand, indicated the opaque, glasslike bubble.

As they watched, it wavered and grew transparent, then disappeared.

The Horn's space-launch and the meteor ship of the Siykulan were drifting a scant ten miles above an alien planet from which immense buildings, for as far as they could see, reached up to them like greedy fingers.

STEVE HORN flicked cigaret ashes onto the floor of what seemed to be the room of a Siykulan hotel.

"I don't like it one little bit," he said. "It isn't the delay so much as the affront to our intelligence."

"Yes, darling," soothed Myra. "We should have shown them our diplomas and degrees. Or challenged them to a spelling bee!"

"You're not funny," said her husband. "Do you realize that we've been in this hole for a week? Do you realize that Art Wilder and everyone on Jupiter and Earth will think we're dead?" He paused. "Not that we won't be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if they stick us in one of those ships of theirs to go explore that mad-aura continent and find out what's behind all the mystery, we'd be better off dead than crazy."

Myra laughed. "What an ego you must have, my husband. It won't permit you to think that it's possible these peach-

people have bigger and better brainwaves than we."

A bell sounded and a blue light went on and off above the door.

"Open it yourself," shouted Steve irritably. "I don't know how."

The door opened. Peachy entered.

Accompanying him was a strictly utilitarian piece of robot machinery. Headless, it consisted of a long steel body terminating in a balled foot at one end and two triple-jointed arms at the other. At the end of each arm was a murderous looking spiked ball, both of which swung idly and menacingly at the thing's sides.

Peachy beckoned to them. When they hesitated, the robot clanged its spiked fists together with an unpleasant ringing sound, then raised them menacingly in the air.

Steve and Myra blanched, and meekly followed Peachy through the door. They walked outside, followed Peachy to a spaceship and entered.

Myra looked at Steve a trifle uncertainly.

"Resistance would have been futile, I suppose?"

Steve tried to make himself comfortable on a tiny seat of the cabin.

"I think so, considering that our only hope of ever getting back to our own System lies in playing ball with these fuzzy Fascists. There may not be much chance of our succeeding in this screwball expedition, but the important thing is that there is *some*. Putting up a fight might have been gratifying to the ego, but I doubt that it would have convinced these gangsters that they ought to send us back home."

"I suppose you're right, Steve. But just what exactly do you think our chances are, this way?"

"Looking at it from the scientific angle, we're pretty well off. Here we are scootling along at Lord knows what speed, in what may well be the most up to date ship in the universe, with nothing to do but push Button X when we get to Point Q on—what the hell'd I do with that chart?"

"It's all right," said Myra. "I've got it."

"—And we land without fuss or bother. Providing . . ." A worried look crept into Steve's face.

"Providing we don't go nuts," supplemented Myra.

"We do have to put an awful lot of faith in Peachy's theory that we're subnormal enough, mentally, to escape the spider-people's batty beam. Then all they ask is that we put the beam out of business, or show them how they can."

"Steve!" Myra's eyes reflected inspiration. "Why don't we escape? I mean really escape. Get out of this whole business!"

"You mean off the planet?"

Myra nodded.

"Peachy paid a touching tribute to our allegedly minus intelligence by warning me against any such ideas—for our own good. Our fuel would last, and our food might, and even we might, since it'd take years without Peachy's space-annihilator. The only thing that stands in our way is the fact that this ship isn't space-proof. It leaks air. Compared to our Skypiercer," Steve clutched at a simile, "it is as a hot-foot compared to a holocaust."

"Well," Myra shrugged philosophically, "no one can say Lady Horn ever leaves a stone unturned."

"If you've stopped blowing your own, Horn," said Steve recklessly, "come look at the view. It makes me homesick."

#### IV

THE tiny ship sped along, a thousand feet above the great ocean that separated Siykul from its neighboring continent. Only a slight mental effort was needed to imagine themselves back on Earth. Long swells swept across the deep, green surface. No sea-craft were in sight, but occasionally a huge fish would break through the surface and quiver in the air as sunlight glistened on the drops of water it shook from its back.

Miles ahead, land appeared, like lowering clouds on the horizon. Ten minutes of flying brought them over the shore—a wide beach that stretched back half a mile and ended abruptly in a forest.

The forest seemed endless.

"We must have gone a hundred miles inland," said Myra. "When are we supposed to push that fateful button?"

"Point Q is described as a large prairie. We should reach it any minute now."

"What's that up ahead?"

"That appears to be it," said Steve.

He pushed the button with crossed fingers. The ship immediately went into a long glide. The ground came up rapidly. Just when they thought they would surely crash, the nose came up automatically and the ship skidded to a bumpy halt.

Steve shut off the motor. "Last stop," he said.

Myra looked at him closely.

"Steve," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," he replied. "Why? Scared?"

"No. I mean—aren't we supposed to be . . . well, affected, somehow?"

"Oh." Steve looked at her and scratched his head in thought. "Well-l, I do feel a trifle crazy."

"How?" Myra looked concerned.

Steve grinned impishly. "I feel like kissing you."

Myra puffed out her cheeks in mock anger, then smiled.

"You know," she said, "I feel the same way."

They didn't see the two creatures that stood outside the ship, watching them through the transparent door.

Myra's eyes opened. She looked over her husband's shoulder.

"Steve," she whispered.

"Mmmm?" he said dreamily.

"Remember your American history? Apaches, Utes and Algonquins?"

"You mean the good old days, before spaceships and the machine age?"

"Yes. And we're back in it. Look."

Steve turned around.

"Good grief!" he said. "Indians!"

For a long time the two parties stared at each other without moving. Gradually their faces broke into smiles, the natives' of polite interest and the Horns of relief at having found the "spider people" of Peachy's description to be simply human beings like themselves.

Finally the two outside came a little closer. The older one raised his hand, palm outward.

Steve, hoping it meant friendship, did the same. He opened the door of the ship.

The men outside were about six feet tall and burned a deep copper color by the planet's bright sun. They wore breech clouts of soft leather and moccasins of

the same material. Their faces were fine and intelligent, with high brows and prominent noses. The elder had a shock of stiff, gray-white hair, while the hair of the younger was black. Their bodies, even in the older man, were muscular and powerful-looking.

Steve and Myra hopped to the ground. Now that the possibility of being captured and enwebbed by giant red spiders had been discarded, Steve's spirits soared. He addressed the younger native jocularly:

"You don't happen to know of a good hotel around here, do you?"

The young man evidently understood the tenor of the question, for his face broke into a smile and he rattled off a string of gutturals in a speech that was reminiscent of something Steve had heard, but no more understandable than the voice of the wind sighing through the trees above them.

The elder of the two had more sense than any of them. Evidently he realized that these one-sided conversations might go on all day. He motioned to the rest to follow him.

Steve, with a look at the ship, hesitated a moment. Then he remembered Peachy and his mechanical mace. He made a grimace of distaste, took Myra's arm and followed.

THERE were no walls around the village. It began abruptly in a semi-cleared space half a mile from where their ship had landed. Dwarfed by the huge trees that surrounded it, it looked like something a gifted child might have built with a mechanical construction set.

The houses were mostly two and three room affairs, one-storied and square, all made of green steel. From a distance, the village blended perfectly with the surrounding forest, making it invisible from the air.

The houses had been set up in no preconceived pattern and gave a pleasant, haphazard effect to the scene. Nowhere had a tree been felled to make way for a house. Here nature and man shared a sylvan paradise, nature always given preference.

Steve and Myra had been led to one of the larger buildings which consisted of one huge dining room with tables and

chairs of the same green steel and here they were given food and drink not unlike what they had known on Earth. Myra's very faint misgivings about the quality of the food were allayed when their two hosts sat down to eat with them.

At the conclusion of the meal, Steve was somewhat astonished when the two accepted the cigarettes he offered and smoked them with apparent enjoyment.

A tour of the village impressed the visitors with the ease and contentment in which these simple people lived. Men and women worked in their gardens, or sat in the doorways of their houses fashioning the soft, leather garments that seemed to be their sole articles of dress. Children played between the trees, and in them, shrieking with young laughter. Many of the people showed curiosity about the visitors, but respectfully kept at a distance.

Their hosts led Steve and Myra to a tiny building that looked like an old subway kiosk. With no thought of being on their guard, they entered, and were taken by surprise when the floor dropped away beneath them.

"My astral aunt!" exclaimed Myra. "An elevator!"

"Why not?" asked Steve. "Any race that can make steel ought to be able to build an elevator."

The car stopped after a long descent, and the party stepped out into a high-ceilinged underground room, filled with hurrying people and, what was more apparent, noise. Sounds of machinery in feverish action crashed upon their eardrums in rhythmic, deafening beats. The giant machines themselves could be seen through great casings of glass-like material. Men sat at lever-studded desks here and there, evidently in control of the metal prometheans.

Their guides led them quickly through the large room and out through a corridor at the far end. They passed many such rooms that branched off from the hall, but none so large as the first.

At length they came to a platform. Beside it there was a strip of slowly moving steel. Next to this was another, moving faster. There were several more, each moving a bit faster than its predecessor, and the last one, on which there were

seats, moving at thirty miles per hour.

Carefully they made their way across these strips and sat down in the leather seats. Presently they were whizzing through a dimly illuminated tunnel.

Steve and Myra took part in all these proceedings with interest, while questions mounted in their minds. They made many suppositions to each other, some of them fantastic. On the whole, they were enjoying themselves.

Steve estimated they had gone about five miles when the moving strips rounded a curve and their hosts signed that they were to get off. They made their way over the more slowly moving strips onto another platform and through a door.

Beyond the door was a wide corridor with an arched ceiling. The whole was a faint green, the effect achieved by painting the green steel of which the tunnel was constructed with white paint, which Steve reasoned had a luminous quality, since the light evidently came from the walls themselves.

AS the faint rumble of the transportation strips died away behind them, they walked through a silence that was almost reverent. Their guides, who had heretofore carried on a pleasant guttural conversation between themselves, became silent, almost grave. A feeling of inexplicable awe crept over the visitors.

The corridor stretched ahead in a straight line, without a bend to mar its symmetry. Just when they thought it would go on interminably, a great double door appeared at the far end. It took up the whole width and height of the tunnel, and, contrastingly, was of wood, carved over all in intricate designs.

When they came to it, the older man knocked on it with the ball of his palm. The echoes of the sound reverberated throughout the tunnel. Slowly the door swung inward and revealed a dimly-lit room twenty feet high and about fifty square. A dark red carpet covered the floor. Heavy, comfortable-looking armchairs had been placed against the walls, and an immense wooden table occupied the center of the room. What light there was came from an ornate glass chandelier which hung halfway between the floor and ceiling.

Steve and Myra took two involuntary steps into the room and stopped, to stare about them for several minutes without moving. The thing that struck them so forcibly was the extraordinary resemblance between the manner in which the room was furnished and one on Earth.

Finally the spell broke and almost simultaneously they turned around. Their guides were gone. They could see them just within sight at the other end of the long corridor. They were about to go after them, when a voice said, in *English*:

"Won't you come in?"

## V

STEVE and Myra turned around at the sound of the voice and automatically stepped back into the room. It wasn't until a few seconds later that they realized what had happened. Someone here, light years away from Earth, had spoken to them in their own language! They looked at each other with amazement, then looked around for the speaker.

"I'm over here," the voice said, "to your right."

In that dimly-lit part of the room they made out the figure of an old man sitting in a high-backed chair, his hands stretched out on its arms.

"Please come in," he said.

Slowly they went over to him. He was a very old man, his face and hands deeply wrinkled, with white hair brushed neatly away from his intelligent forehead. There was a curious immobility about him that half-frightened them, but his eyes were kindly.

Steve and Myra sat down. There was silence for a minute. Then:

"I am very wise," the old man said abruptly.

Unable to help himself, Steve chuckled. Myra looked at him reprovingly.

"You mustn't laugh at me," said the old man. "I know much. What I say is true. You must remember that. And if you will be patient and humor me, I will tell you where you are, and how you came to be."

"You mean how we came to be *here*," corrected Steve.

"You mustn't interrupt me, either," said the old man irritably. "I mean what I

say. I will tell you how you began and how you are related to me and many other trivial things like how you will leave here when you have decided to go."

"We were on our way to Jupiter," said Myra, "when we got kidnaped. Steve was going to teach at college there."

"It is a good thing to teach," the old man said. "Of course, you know very little, but it is admirable to teach those who know less. I have always been a teacher. . . ." He trailed off into silence.

"Just what do you mean by 'always,'" asked Steve, "as long as we're being rude to each other. Just how old are you?"

"Who knows?" the old man answered slowly. "Hundreds of thousands of years."

Myra gave a little yip.

"Steve," she gasped. "His lips aren't moving!"

The oldester took this with equanimity.

"True," he said. "Because they aren't mine. At least not any more. You see, the real me is up here, in this vat. I'm just a brain. That thing you've been talking to is just a corpse. I hope you don't mind."

Myra shuddered.

"It's all right," the voice continued. "It's sanitary. They used the best embalming fluid."

"How come you speak English?" asked Steve.

"I don't," said the voice. "You might as well ask why people understand music written by people who speak different languages. I'm not speaking; I'm thinking out loud, if you will pardon the idiom. Music and thought are universal.

"Now I will tell you a story. Many millions of years ago there was a great planet, the greatest in the universe. On it was bred a race of geniuses. Mentally, the planet was ideal; physically, it was less fortunate. Our sun was about to become a nova. As a result, the day came when our scientists were forced to warn their people that they would have to leave the planet before it was burned to a cinder.

"There was one scientist who was more renowned than the others, and with good reason. It was he who had isolated the *gion* beam, as it was called, which had the property of breaking down a sub-

stance to its component atoms and sending it wherever directed.

"To make the story easier to tell, I will admit that I was that scientist, and that my name is Gion, which you may call me, if you can do so without interrupting me."

He paused for a moment, as if marshalling his memories.

"Our scientists searched the universe with their instruments, seeking another planet. Finally this one was located. But it was too distant to be reached within a lifespan by means of the antiquated space ships we had then. Only one method was possible—the *gion* beam.

"Even this method was not completely satisfactory, because it would require terrific power to transport anything here and we hadn't fuel for more than one shipment. Therefore, it was necessary to make a careful selection of those who were to go and what they were to take with them.

"About three hundred were chosen—two hundred women and a hundred men, all unmarried and all about twenty. The emphasis was put on human beings, and not on equipment, so only certain surgical supplies were taken.

"It was decided that one master-scientist was to go, regardless of his age, to act as guide and counselor to the new race. I was chosen, and it was a very bad choice. You see, I was dying of cancer of the stomach at the time. Naturally, I protested, but they paid no attention. Instead they killed me."

"**W**HAT?" gasped Myra.  
"Exactly," said Gion. "They killed my body and locked my wise old brain in this glass case. Would you believe it—sometimes I get bored."

Steve laughed. "You know, Mr. Gion, you're amazing. Tell me, did your party ever get here?"

"No I'll tell you about the hairy people," said Gion reprovingly. "After we had set up our village and things were going along nicely, we met the people who lived on the planet long before we arrived. Those peach-colored scoundrels you've already met. Pack of thieves. They used to come around at night and steal anything they could lay their hands

on. They would also watch up for hours while we worked and later imitate what we did. It didn't take them long to develop from dumb animals to malignantly intelligent creatures. Naturally we had to get rid of them.

"We drove them down to the sea. As we might have expected, they played a foul trick on us. They stole one of our ships and escaped across the ocean. Ever since they've been getting brighter and brighter and breeding like rabbits, until now they've overrun their continent and want ours. Naturally, we had to take steps."

"So you surrounded your continent with a field of insanity, producing vibrations to send them back gibbering?" asked Steve.

The voice laughed. "Is that what they told you? Crazy beasts—we did no such thing. It would be too much bother, too expensive and—well, impossible. Our defense is much simpler. We merely let them land and get out of their ships—then biff them with our insanity beam. And since we don't want any idiotic foreigners running around our forests, we pile them back into their ships and shoot them back home. Nothing to it."

Gion paused. Myra, who had been waiting for a propitious moment, said:

"I thought you were going to tell us how *we* began?"

"I am. I am," he said. "Our new civilization was about a century old, when we began to receive messages from far out in space. They were from a ship that had taken off from our old planet just before the explosion, manned by an intrepid group of people who knew that they would never live to reach another land, but who hoped that their children might.

"The messages were pathetic. They were from the sole survivor of the original travelers, who said that their children had revolted against the rigid discipline he had tried to maintain, and that the ship was in a state of bedlam. Only the fact that he had sealed the engine room against them had prevented them from reaching the controls and destroying themselves. Inertia kept the ship on its course.

"Further messages from this old man reached us, saying that the rebels had reverted practically to wild beasts and



were living in a state of indescribable filth. Our records show that the ship didn't reach your Earth until sixty years later, so you can imagine the condition its passengers were in when it finally landed. And those were your ancestors."

"A pretty picture," grimaced Steve. There was a moment's silence. Then said: "Why do you live underground, or at least work down here? Isn't it impractical?"

"On the contrary," explained Gion, "it's very practical. You see, we're a peace-loving people. We don't like trouble, and we don't believe in waging war to keep out of trouble at some future date. Consequently, we build all our factories underground, so that the hairy people can't blow them up whenever they feel like it by flying over and dropping bombs. Another reason is that we like the forest and believe it's healthy for our children to grow up there. We don't build cities

resplendent green spaceship waiting on the take-off ways.

So simple was the ship in construction that less than an hour of intensive instruction from Gion, on a model control board set up in the underground room, was sufficient to acquaint him perfectly with the management of the craft.

It almost frightened him to think that he and Myra were about to undertake a journey in a ship so swift that they would arrive on Jupiter, in an inestimably distant solar system, almost as soon as they would have in their Skypiercer, had they not been interrupted by Peachy.

At last, all was ready. Steve and Myra waved good-bye to the people they had come to know as friends in such a short time, and sealed themselves inside the ship.

Steve consulted the charts for a second, then sent the ship into a noiseless take-off that soon left the field far below, al-

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to make targets for the potential enemy—human or bacterial, whichever it might be—but try to live in as close cooperation with nature as possible. Does that make sense?"

"It makes perfect sense," agreed Myra. Steve nodded.

"And now," said Gion, "if I read your minds correctly, you'd like to get away from this garrulous old man and see some more of our country before you continue your interrupted journey to Jupiter."

## VI

**W**HAT had seemed to be a long flat meadow was in reality, just beneath the surface, an emergency airport that was used in place of the moving chairs or the underground freight-railway when speed was imperative. Seldom used, but always in a state of preparedness, the port now buzzed with activity as the roof of simulated grass rolled back, disclosing a

ready being retransformed into a green meadow. He followed his instructions carefully and kept the ship at a moderate speed, to wait until the gravitational pull of the planet had been left behind before beginning the almost unbelievable acceleration of which the ship was capable.

Myra sat in thought for a moment, then: "Steve," she said, "I don't want to seem skeptical, but doesn't Gion's theory about the beginning of man on Earth sort of conflict with our time-honored theory of evolution? Apes and men from the same source, and all that?"

"Not exactly," Steve said. "The evidence seems to point to the fact that those third-generation refugees landed on North America a few ages ago, and founded the Indian nations. It's the only tenable explanation of the origin of the American Indian that I've ever heard."

The planet was rapidly growing smaller behind them.

"If only they hadn't mutinied against

discipline, it's probable that with their advanced knowledge, the Indians would have discovered Europe long before Columbus—or Lief Erickson—crossed the Atlantic. Their culture, if they had kept it, might have been a better incentive to European development than theirs was—

"Brrrr!" Myra shivered suddenly. "I get the creeps when I think of talking to a corpse."

Steve Horn chuckled. "Don't ever accuse me of being dead, again," he said mockingly. "At least, I can get up and walk around."

He flipped the drive control, sent the green space-ship whipping past a darting meteor. He spun the ship again, in a tight circle, thrilling to the surge of power released by the light touch of his hand on the controls, then laughed aloud at Myra's instant cry of ecstatic alarm.

"Hush, Infant," he said, "I'm just practicing up for the time when I sell the rights to the constructing of ships identical to this. Boy, will the shekels ever roll in!"

Myra tucked in a loose strand of hair, bent over and kissed Steve on the lobe of his right ear. He squirmed, wriggled, jerked the ship off-course by an inadvertent twitch of his hand, growled playfully, then let the ship travel uncontrolled while he kissed the ear of his wife in return.

"Steve, pulleeze!" Myra said faintly.

"What were you saying about the Indians, dear?" she asked finally.

"'Lo, the poor Indian,'" Steve misquoted, "he has gone the way of all—*Damn!*" His words were bitten off by the sudden jerking of the ship.

Myra frowned. "Maybe those Indians didn't build this thing so well," she said worriedly. "Remember Peachy said the first few ships built by his people wouldn't fly. It would be just our luck to try and ride an experimental job back to Jupiter."

Steve jiggled the controls.

"Something grabbed us," he said. "Something just reached out and jerked us off-course—tried to hold us back."

"I don't believe it," Myra said. "You're just—"

The ship whipped to one side, then bucked playfully like a trout riding a fisherman's line.

"Ugh!" said Steve faintly, struggled to pull his body back into his seat.

"Steve, I'm frightened!" Myra wailed.

"Nonsense!" Steve said stoutly. "There isn't a blamed thing to be afra—"

**S**UDDENLY the ship began to toss crazily, like a rat shaken in a terrier's teeth. Steve and Myra were thrown to the floor. Unsteadily making their way to a window, they saw a little golden meteor-ship, such as had been the beginning of all their trouble. Evidently they were caught in its magnetic field. Steve tried accelerating, but they were powerless to escape.

Myra burst into helpless tears. "Oh, Steve, this is too much. We *can't* go back there again."

"Damn those peach-creatures!" said Steve. "Just when I thought we'd never see them again."

Again letters of fire appeared above the little golden ship. "RETURN," they said, simply.

"You're not going to do it?" asked Myra.

"There's no use getting killed." Steve shrugged disgustedly.

He was about to reverse the ship's course when a long snake-like flame streaked up from the planet below with a menacing rumble that could be felt through the hull of the ship.

The golden craft saw it coming and tried to escape, but the lash of flame followed its frantic dodgings inexorably. Suddenly, like a striking snake, it straightened. Its tip touched the meteor-ship. There was an eye-blinding flash.

When they could see again, nothing was visible but the planet below, looking serene and peaceful on the wooded half of its surface turned to them. Of the attacking ship or the instrument of its doom there was no sign.

Steve Horn looked for the last time at the planet before climbing back into the control seat. He wiped his eyes with a self-conscious gesture.

"Thanks," he said.

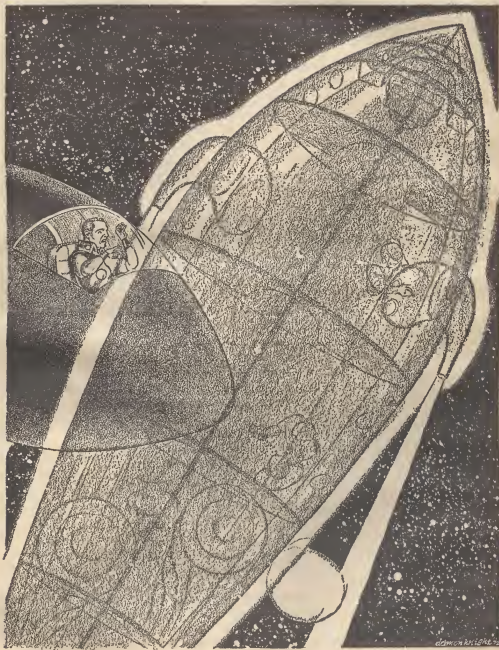
And flicked the drive-beam that was to send them home.

# GALACTIC GHOST

By WALTER KUBILIUS

The Flying Dutchman of space was a harbinger of death. But Willard wasn't superstitious. He had seen the phantom—and lived.

*Illustrated by Knight*



**T**HE only friend in space Willard had ever known was dying. Dobbin's lips were parched and his breath came spasmodically. The tips of his fin-

gers that had so many times caressed the control board of the Mary Lou were now black as meteor dust.

"We'll never see Earth again," he whis-

pered feebly, plucked weakly at the cover.

"Nonsense!" Willard broke in hurriedly, hoping that the dying man would not see through the lie. "We've got the sun's gravity helping us drift back to Earth! We'll be there soon! You'll get well soon and we'll start to work again on a new idea of mine. . . ." His voice trailed helplessly away and the words were lost. It was no use.

The sick man did not hear him. Two tears rolled down his cheeks. His face contorted as he tried to withhold a sob.

"To see Earth again!" he said weakly. "To walk on solid ground once more!"

"Four years!" Willard echoed faintly. He knew how his space mate felt. No man can spend four years away from his home planet, and fail to be anguished. A man could live without friends, without fortune, but no man could live without Earth. He was like Anteus, for only the feel of the solid ground under his feet could give him courage to go among the stars.

Willard also knew what he dared not admit to himself. He, too, like Dobbin, would never see Earth again. Perhaps, some thousand years from now, some lonely wanderers would find their battered hulk of a ship in space and bring them home again.

Dobbin motioned to him and, in answer to a last request, Willard lifted him so he faced the port window for a final look at the panorama of the stars.

Dobbin's eyes, dimming and half closed, took in the vast play of the heavens and in his mind he relived the days when in a frail craft he first crossed interstellar space. But for Earth-loneliness Dobbin would die a happy man, knowing that he had lived as much and as deeply as any man could.

Silently the two men watched. Dobbin's eyes opened suddenly and a tremor seized his body. He turned painfully and looked at Willard.

"I saw it!" his voice cracked, trembling.

"Saw what?"

"It's true! It's true! It comes whenever a space man dies! It's there!"

"In heaven's name, Dobbin," Willard demanded, "What do you see? What is it?"

Dobbin lifted his dark bony arm and

pointed out into star-studded space.

"The Ghost Ship!"

Something clicked in Willard's memory. He had heard it spoken of in whispers by drunken space men and professional tellers of fairy tales. But he had never put any stock in them. In some forgotten corner of Dobbin's mind the legend of the Ghost Ship must have lain, to come up in this time of delirium.

"There's nothing there," he said firmly.

"It's come—for me!" Dobbin cried. He turned his head slowly toward Willard, tried to say something and then fell back upon the pillow. His mouth was open and his eyes stared unseeing ahead. Dobbin was now one with the vanished pioneers of yesterday. Willard was alone.

For two days, reckoned in Earth time, Willard kept vigil over the body of his friend and space mate. When the time was up he did what was necessary and nothing remained of Harry Dobbin, the best friend he had ever had. The atoms of his body were now pure energy stored away in the useless motors of the *Mary Lou*.

THE weeks that followed were like a blur in Willard's mind. Though the ship was utterly incapable of motion, the chance meteor that damaged it had spared the convertors and assimilators. Through constant care and attention the frail balance that meant life or death could be kept. The substance of waste and refuse was torn down and rebuilt as precious food and air. It was even possible to create more than was needed.

When this was done, Willard immediately regretted it. For it would be then that the days and the weeks would roll by endlessly. Sometimes he thought he would go mad when, sitting at the useless control board, which was his habit, he would stare for hours and hours in the direction of the Sun where he knew the Earth would be. A great loneliness would then seize upon him and an agony that no man had ever known would tear at his heart. He would then turn away, full of despair and hopeless pain.

Two years after Dobbin's death a strange thing happened. Willard was sitting at his accustomed place facing the unmoving vista of the stars. A chance glance at

Orion's belt froze him still. A star had flickered! Distinctly, as if a light veil had been placed over it and then lifted, it dimmed and turned bright again. What strange phenomena was this? He watched and then another star faded momentarily in the exact fashion. And then a third! And a fourth! And a fifth!

Willard's heart gave a leap and the lethargy of two years vanished instantly. Here, at last, was something to do. It might be only a few minutes before he would understand what it was, but those few minutes would help while away the maddening long hours. Perhaps it was a mass of fine meteorites or a pocket of gas that did not disperse, or even a moving warp of space-light. Whatever it was, it was a phenomena worth investigating and Willard seized upon it as a dying man seizes upon the last flashing seconds of life.

Willard traced its course by the flickering stars and gradually plotted its semi-circular course. It was not from the solar system but, instead, headed toward it. A rapid check-up on his calculations caused his heart to beat in ever quickening excitement. Whatever it was, it would reach the *Mary Lou*.

Again he looked out the port. Unquestionably the faint mass was nearing his ship. It was round in shape and almost invisible. The stars, though dimmed, could still be seen through it. There was something about its form that reminded him of an old-fashioned rocket ship. It resembled one of those that had done pioneer service in the lanes forty years ago or more. Resembled one? It was one! Unquestionably, though half-invisible and like a piece of glass immersed in water, it was a rocket ship.

But the instruments on the control board could not lie. The presence of any material body within a hundred thousand miles would be revealed. But the needle on the gauge did not quiver. Nothing indicated the presence of a ship. But the evidence of his eyes was incontestable.

Or was it? Doubt gripped him. Did the loneliness of all these years in space twist his mind till he was imagining the appearance of faint ghost-like rocket ships?

The thought shot through his mind like a thunder bolt. Ghost Ship! Was this

the thing that Dobbin had seen before he died? But that was impossible. Ghost Ships existed nowhere but in legends and tall tales told by men drunk with the liquors of Mars.

"There is no ship there. There is no ship there," Willard told himself over and over again as he looked at the vague outline of the ship, now motionless a few hundred miles away.

Deep within him a faint voice cried, "*It's come—for me!*" but Willard stilled it. This was no fantasy. There was a scientific reason for it. There must be! Or should there be? Throughout all Earth history there had been Ghost Ships sailing the Seven Seas—ships doomed to roam forever because their crew broke some unbreakable law. If this was true for the ships of the seas, why not for the ships of empty space?

He looked again at the strange ship. It was motionless. At least it was not nearing him. Willard could see nothing but its vague outline. A moment later he could discern a faint motion. It was turning! The Ghost Ship was turning back! Unconsciously Willard reached out with his hand as if to hold it back, for when it was gone he would be alone again.

But the Ghost Ship went on. Its outline became smaller and smaller, fainter and fainter.

Trembling, Willard turned away from the window as he saw the rocket recede and vanish into the emptiness of space. Once more the dreaded loneliness of the stars descended upon him.

SEVEN years passed and back on Earth in a small newspaper that Willard would never see there was published a small item:

"*Arden, Rocketport*—Thirteen years ago the Space Ship *Mary Lou* under John Willard and Larry Dobbin left the Rocket Port for the exploration of an alleged planetoid beyond Pluto. The ship has not been seen or heard from since. J. Willard, II, son of the lost explorer, is planning the manufacture of a super-size exploration ship to be called *Mary Lou*, II, in memory of his father."

Memories die hard. A man who is alone in space with nothing but the cold friendship of star-light looks back upon

memories as the only things both dear and precious to him.

Willard, master and lone survivor of the *Mary Lou*, knew this well for he had tried to rip the memories of Earth out of his heart to ease the anguish of solitude within him. But it was a thing that could not be done.

And so it was that each night—for Willard did not give up the Earth-habit of keeping time—Willard dreamed of the days he had known on Earth.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself walking the streets of Arden and feeling the crunch of snow or the soft slap of rain-water under his feet. He heard again, in his mind, the voices of friends he knew. How beautiful and perfect was each voice! How filled with warmth and friendship! There was the voice of his beautiful wife whom he would never see again. There were the gruff and deep voices of his co-workers and scientists.

Above all there were the voices of the cities, and the fields and the shops where he had worked. All these had their individual voices. Odd that he had never realized it before, but things become clearer to a man who is alone.

Clearer? Perhaps not. Perhaps they become more clouded. How could he, for example, explain the phenomena of the Ghost Ship? Was it really only a product of his imagination? What of all the others who had seen it? Was it possible for many different men under many different situations to have the same exact illusion? Reason denied that. But perhaps space itself denies reason.

Grimly he retraced the legend of the Ghost Ship. A chance phrase here and a story there put together all that he knew:

Doomed for all eternity to wander in the empty star-lanes, the Ghost Ship haunts the Solar System that gave it birth. And this is its tragedy, for it is the home of spacemen who can never go home again. When your last measure of fuel is burnt and your ship becomes a lifeless hulk—the Ghost will come—for you!

And this is all there was to the legend. Merely a tale of some fairy ship told to amuse and to while away the days of a star-voyage. Bitterly, Willard dismissed it from his mind.

Another year of loneliness passed. And

still another. Willard lost track of the days. It was difficult to keep time for to what purpose could time be kept. Here in space there was no time, nor was there reason for clocks and records. Days and months and years became meaningless words for things that once may have had meaning. About three years must have passed since his last record in the log book of the *Mary Lou*. At that time, he remembered, he suffered another great disappointment. On the port side there suddenly appeared a full-sized rocket ship. For many minutes Willard was half-mad with joy thinking that a passing ship was ready to rescue him. But the joy was short-lived, for the rocket ship abruptly turned away and slowly disappeared. As Willard watched it go away he saw the light of a distant star *through* the space ship. A heart-breaking agony fell upon him. It was not a ship from Earth. It was the Ghost Ship, mocking him.

Since then Willard did not look out the window of his craft. A vague fear troubled him that perhaps the Ghost Ship might be here, waiting and watching, and that he would go mad if he saw it.

How many years passed he could not tell. But this he knew. He was no longer a young man. Perhaps fifteen years had disappeared into nothing. Perhaps twenty. He did not know and he did not care.

WILLARD awoke from a deep sleep and prepared his bed. He did it, not because it was necessary, but because it was a habit that had long been ingrained in him through the years.

He checked and rechecked every part of the still functioning mechanism of the ship. The radio, even though there was no one to call, was in perfect order. The speed-recording dials, even though there was no speed to record, were in perfect order. And so with every machine. All was in perfect order. Perfect useless order, he thought bitterly, when there was no way whatever to get sufficient power to get back to Earth, long forgotten Earth.

He was leaning back in his chair when a vague uneasiness seized him. He arose and slowly walked over to the window, his age already being marked in the ache of his bones. Looking out into the silent theater of the stars, he suddenly froze,



There was a ship, coming toward him!

For a moment the reason in his mind tottered on a balance. Doubt assailed him. Was this the Ghost Ship come to torment him again? But no phantom this! It was a life and blood rocket ship from Earth! Starlight shone on it and not through it! Its lines, window, vents were all solid and had none of the ghost-like quality he remembered seeing in the Ghost Ship in his youth.

For another split second he thought that perhaps he, too, like Dobbin, had gone mad and that the ship would vanish just as it approached him.

The tapping of the space-telegrapher reassured him.

"CALLING SPACE SHIP MARY LOU," the message rapped out, "CALLING SPACE SHIP MARY LOU."

With trembling fingers that he could scarcely control, old Willard sent the answering message.

"SPACE SHIP MARY LOU REPLYING. RECEIVED MESSAGE. THANK GOD!"

He broke off, unable to continue. His heart was ready to burst within him and the tears of joy were already welling in his eyes. He listened to the happiest message he had ever heard:

"NOTICE THAT SPACE SHIP MARY LOU IS DISABLED AND NOT SPACE WORTHY. YOU ARE INVITED TO COME ABOARD. HAVE YOU SPACE SUIT AND—ARE YOU ABLE TO COME?"

Willard, already sobbing with joy, could send only two words.

"YES! COMING!"

The years of waiting were over. At last he was free of the Mary Lou. In a dream like trance, he dressed in his space suit, pathetically glad that he had already checked every detail of it a short time ago. He realized suddenly that everything about the Mary Lou was hateful to him. It was here that his best friend died, and it was here that twenty years of his life were wasted completely in solitude and despair.

He took one last look and stepped into the airlock.

The Earth-ship, he did not see its name, was only a hundred yards away and a man was already at the air-lock waiting

to help him. A rope was tossed to him. He reached for it and made his way to the ship, leaving the Mary Lou behind him forever.

Suddenly the world dropped away from him. Willard could neither see nor say anything. His heart was choked with emotion.

"It's all right," a kindly voice assured him, "You're safe now."

He had the sensation of being carried by several men and then placed in bed. The quiet of deep sleep descended upon him.

HE woke many times in the following days, but the privations of the passing years had drained his strength and his mind, had made him so much of a hermit that the presence of other men frightened him to the point of gibbering insanity.

He knew that the food and drink were drugged, for after eating he never remembered seeing the men enter the room to care for him and to remove the dirty dishes. But there was enough sanity in his mind to also realize that, without the gradual reawakening of his senses to the value of human companionship, he might not be able to stand the mental shock of moving about among his people back on Earth.

During those passing days, he savored each new impression, comparing it with what he remembered from that age-long past when he and his friends had walked on Earth's great plains and ridden on the oceans' sleek ships or flown with the wings of birds over the mountain ranges. And each impression was doubly enjoyable, for his memory was hazy and confused.

Gradually, though, his mind cleared; he remembered the past, and he no longer was afraid of the men who visited him from time to time. But there was a strangeness about the men that he could not fathom; they refused to talk about anything, any subject, other than the actual running of the great ship. Always, when he asked his eager questions, they mumbled and drifted away.

And then in his third week on the rescue ship, he went to sleep one night while peering from the port hole at the blue ball of Earth swimming in the blackness of space. He slept and he dreamed of the

years he had spent by himself in the drifting, lifeless hulk of the *Mary Lou*. His dreams were vivid, peopled with men and women he had once known, and were horrible with the fantasies of terror that years of solitary brooding had implanted deep in his mind.

HE awoke with a start and a cry of alarm ran through him as he thought that perhaps he might still be in the *Mary Lou*. The warm, smiling face of a man quickly reassured him.

"I'll call the captain," the space man said. "He said to let him know when you came to."

Willard could only nod in weak and grateful acceptance. It was true! He pressed his head back against the bed's pillows. How soft! How warm! He yawned and stretched his arms as a thrill of happiness shot through his entire body.

He would see Earth again! That single thought ran over and over in his mind without stopping. He would see Earth again! Perhaps not this year and perhaps not the next—for the ship might be on some extra-Plutonian expedition. But even if it would take years before it returned to home base Willard knew that those years would fly quickly if Earth was at the end of the trail.

Though he had aged, he still had many years before him. And those years, he vowed, would be spent on Earth and nowhere else.

The captain, a pleasant old fellow, came into the room as Willard stood up and tried to walk. The gravity here was a bit different from that of his ship, but he would manage.

"How do you feel, Space Man Willard?"

"Oh, you know me?" Willard looked at him in surprise, and then smiled, "Of course, you looked through the log book of the *Mary Lou*."

The captain nodded and Willard noticed with surprise that he was a very old man.

"You don't know how much I suffered there," Willard said slowly, measuring each word. "Years in space—all alone! It's a horrible thing!"

"Yes?" the old captain said.

"Many times I thought I would go completely mad. It was only the thought and

hope that some day, somehow, an Earth ship would find me and help me get back to Earth. If it was not for that, I would have died. I could think of nothing but of Earth, of blue green water, of vast open spaces and the good brown earth. How beautiful it must be now!"

A note of sadness, matched only by that of Willard's, entered the captain's eyes.

"I want to walk on Earth just once—then I can die."

Willard stopped. A happy dreamy smile touched his lips.

"When will we go to Earth?" he asked.

The Captain did not answer. Willard waited and a strange memory tugged at him.

"You don't know," the Captain said. It was not a question or a statement. The Captain found it hard to say it. His lips moved slowly.

Willard stepped back and before the Captain told him, *he knew*.

"Matter is relative," he said, "the existent under one condition is non-existent under another. The real here is the non-real there. All things that wander alone in space are gradually drained of their mass and energy until nothing is left but mere shells. That is what happened to the *Mary Lou*. Your ship was real when we passed by twenty years ago. It is now like ours, a vague outline in space. We cannot feel the change ourselves, for change is relative. That is why we became more and more solid to you, as you became more and more faint to any Earth-ship that might have passed. We are real—to ourselves. But to some ship from Earth which has not been in space for more than fifteen years—to that ship, to all intents and purposes, we do not exist.

"Then this ship," Willard said, stunned, "you and I and everything on it . . ."

". . . are doomed," the Captain said. "We cannot go to Earth for the simple reason that we would go *through* it!"

The vision of Earth and green trees faded. He would never see Earth again. He would never feel the crunch of ground under feet as he walked. Never would listen to the voices of friends and the songs of birds. Never: Never. Never. . . .

"Then this is the Ghost Ship and we are the Ghosts!"

"Yes."

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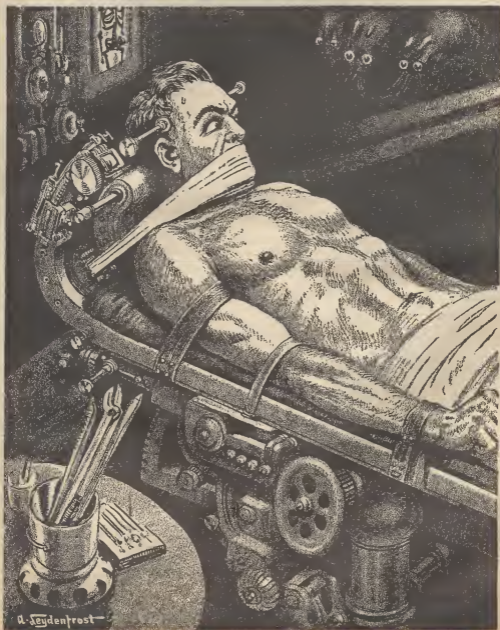
# Meteor-Men of Mars

By Harry Cord and Otis Adelbert Kline

Like tiny meteors, the space-ships plunged into Earth's atmosphere, carrying death for all who opposed their flight. The fate of a world rested in Hammond's hands—and his wrists were fettered at his sides.

IT came out of the dawn sky, slanting like a fiery meteor out of the east. The two men in the skiff saw the glowing streak in the sky and heard the sound of its passage, like the loosing of a nest of angry snakes overhead, a scant second before it plummeted into the calm waters of the Sound.

Illustrated by Leydenfrost



*Zuggoth turned to Hammond. His dwarfed right hand, humanlike, with tiny fingers, picked up a glittering knife.*



A geyser of water and steam shot up not a hundred yards from the maroon and gold skiff. The boat rocked and pitched to the disturbance.

Frank Hammond, seated at the bow, clamped a taped hand over the side to hold himself, surprise quickening the intentness of his dark, handsome face. He was a lithe, bronzed figure, clad only in blue trunks and rope sandals. Stroking for his college crew in years that were warm memories had padded naturally wide shoulders.

"What the devil?" he ejaculated. "Did you see that, Pete?"

Peter Storm grinned. Two inches under his companion's six foot length, he weighed ten pounds more—a heavily muscled figure who could move with deceptive speed as many an opposing eleven had found out in his college football days. Blond, phlegmatic of nature, he took things easier than his more restless friend.

"Meteor, you dummo!" he jibed, good-naturedly. "Ever hear of one before?"

Hammond stared at the spot where the agitation was quieting. "I heard of them," he said shortly. "But this is the first time one ever fell this close to me."

Storm shrugged. "Forget it. This is our last day before going back to the grind.

Let's make the most of it. Remember that bet we— Boy!" He broke off, standing up to haul in.

His catch proved to be a bluefish, a three pounder. He unhooked it, disgustedly, while Frank, measuring it with a quick glance, gave him a Bronx cheer. "If you can't do better than that that new hat's in the bag," he jeered.

They went back to their heaving and hauling, bantering good naturedly over every catch, completely forgetting the strange visitor from the skies.

Both were research chemists for the New York Analytical Laboratories; both were unmarried. They had been inseparable comrades since their college days, when both wore identical crew cuts, dressed alike, and always either double-dated or staggled it. In memory of those days their skiff, the *Crawfish*, had been painted maroon inside and a golden yellow outside, maroon and gold having been their school colors.

Their vacation camp was on Ramson's Island, just off Ramson's point on the

Connecticut shore. The rocky island was uninhabited. They had left camp early, intent on making the most of their last day. Reaching the fishing "hole" they had anchored. Both men taped their hands, and each prepared his jig, a long bar of lead to which a hook was attached, and began the process of "heaving and hauling" used in the vicinity for luring bluefish.

They had been at it for about an hour when the "meteor" landed.

Fifteen minutes later they had forgotten it.

THE sun was a huge red ball balanced on the rim of the sea when Frank suddenly felt a jerk on his line that nearly wrenched his arm from its socket. He said nothing. His lips merely tightened, eagerly, as he wished to surprise his companion by hauling in the big one unexpectedly.

But this proved harder than he thought.

His potential catch darted off with such a burst of speed and strength that it dragged boat, anchor and all!

"Hey!" yelled Storm, clutching the boat sides to hold himself. "What's on that jig? A shark? Better cut that line before it swamps us!"

"Like heck I will!" Hammond grunted, hanging on to the line with both taped hands. "This must be the grandfather of all big blues. That new hat's in the bag!"

With both feet braced against the thwarts, he leaned back and pulled with all his strength. But by bit he hauled the "big one" in close, till finally he was able to lift it out of the water and into the boat.

Both men exclaimed in amazement at the thing which came over the side and clanked to the bottom of the boat. It was neither a giant bluefish nor a shark. It was a shiny, iridescent object, slightly shaped like a shark, but quiescent now, and seemingly lifeless.

"What kind of a fish do you call that?" asked Storm disgustedly, leaning forward for better view of the catch. "It looks like a cross between a shark and a toy submarine."

"Damned if it don't!" Hammond replied, staring bewilderedly at his catch.

The thing was about thirty inches in



length, with both vertical and dorsal fins. But instead of one dorsal fin it was equipped with four fins placed equidistantly around the body. These fins contained numerous tubular quills or spines with round openings at the ends, and Hammond's hook had caught between two of these spines. It was as heavy as if made of steel, but despite its weight and metallic sound when struck, it appeared to be constructed entirely of a bluish, iridescent mother-of-pearl.

Hammond removed his hook from between the spines, and lifted his catch onto the empty boat seat between them.

"Better heave it overboard," advised Storm, seriously. "It might be a new-fangled type of mine or bomb. I don't like the looks—"

He stood, open-mouthed, as the "thing" suddenly shot off the boat seat with a hissing roar like that of a small rocket. It scorched the paint as it took off with small, orange-green flares emanating from the tubular quills. It shot upward with incredible speed and was almost immediately lost to view.

Storm's mouth closed slowly. "Hell!" he said, a little dazedly. "I'm afraid to start fishing again, Frank. Might catch a cross between a battleship and a whale."

"I'm hauling up anchor," Hammond countered, grimly. "I don't like the looks of this at all. The coast guard ought to hear of this."

He got one hand on the anchor rope and was starting to hoist in when the strange "catch" suddenly reappeared. It came down in a long slant, circled over the skiff a few times, and finally settled on the scorched seat from which it had taken off.

Hammond stared at the thing and swore. Peter Storm took a firm hold of his oar.

Holes suddenly appeared in the strange craft. Hammond noticed that there were no doors in evidence. The holes seemed to dilate open, like camera shutters, in the gleaming body.

From these openings a host of small creatures crawled. They swarmed out toward both ends of the boat seat.

Storm straightened, oar in hand. "Ants!" he snapped, disgustedly. He began to swing the ash blade down on the scurrying creatures.

The things continued to move about, apparently unharmed. Dents appeared in the oar and in the seat.

Hammond bent over the scurrying creatures and studied them. "No use, Pete," he muttered. "They're not ants. There's no division of head, thorax and abdomen. They're eight-legged and cephalothoracic—more like the arachnids." His startled surprise was fading under the prod of scientific curiosity. "Funny thing, Pete—the legs and shells seem to be composed of the same substance as the 'thing' they come from. Look!"

Storm dropped his oar and came forward. The boat rocked a little to his shift of weight. A faint humming came from the "thing" on the seat, catching his attention.

But Hammond, intent on one of the small creatures he was about to pick up, did not notice. Not until Pete's hoarse shout jerked him away.

"Look out, Frank! That tube—"

Hammond straightened up to face his friend. But Peter Storm had vanished, as if he had never been!

Between Hammond and where Storm had been was the "thing" on the seat. The humming emanating from it now was distinctly audible, and ominous!

A shining tube, mounted in a turret, had appeared in one of the openings. The tube was swinging around, lining itself on Hammond.

The dazed chemist did not think. He reacted instinctively, knowing, somehow, that that tube was related to Storm's disappearance. He twisted, violently, and tried to dive over the boat side.

Something halted him in the act. He felt a strange numbness wrap itself about him, and a cold like nothing he had ever experienced penetrated to his very vitals. Then he felt himself falling, as if through an endless blackness. . . .

THE darkness faded, slowly. He felt his feet jar on solid ground, and the terrible cold left him. But for long moments Frank Hammond stood rigid, his dazed mind trying to accept the strange world he had fallen into.

The landscape about him was maroon in color. Irregular ridges and gullies of apparently molten stone hemmed him in.

Off to his left he could see a huge, bubbly pit that reminded him of fumaroles he had seen in the National Yellowstone Park. Far in the distance, to his right and left, maroon cliffs towered into blue mists.

Hammond stared at the weird scene. Under him he could feel the slow rise and sway of the entire land, as if it were unstable, rocking in space!

For the first few moments Hammond thought he was dreaming. He must have been rendered unconscious by the strange "thing" on the boat. Soon he would awaken—

But the slightly swaying maroon landscape persisted. Hammond looked down at his nearly naked, bronzed body. He hadn't changed. He took a few tentative steps toward the bubbly pit, and the sudden realization that all this *was* real sickened him.

Where was he? What had happened to him and Storm?

A harsh, metallic rattle answered him. Hammond whirled. Topping one of the far ridges appeared an eight-legged monster of gigantic size. It was without head or tail. Its unsegmented body was an iridescent blue, and shaped like a giant pumpkin seed.

The thing flashed menacingly in the bright light of a sun that was but a huge blur in the misty sky. It headed for Hammond with incredible speed, a huge foreleg stretching out in readiness.

Hammond wasted no time in speculation. His dazed mind reacted to but one impulse. Flight!

Turning, he ran for the nearest gully. He went down in a half scramble, and ran along it, the walls looming over his head.

But his huge pursuer gained on him. He could hear the metallic rattle of those flashing legs close behind him. Despair gripped the young chemist as he scrambled out of the gully and ran up the nearest ridge.

The landscape ahead of him was dipping down as he ran, seemingly being tilted by his weight. The thought came back to Hammond that this must be a nightmare. The eight-legged, colossal thing pursuing him was exactly like the tiny antlike creatures that had swarmed out of the strange "catch" he pulled into the *Crawfish* but a few hours ago. Or was it a few hours?

He didn't know. He no longer knew anything. Grim-faced, his breath beginning to come in gasps, he slid down a steep maroon bank, and raced along the shadowed cut that gradually deepened.

It was a hopeless flight. Behind him the clattering monster came, running along the top of the ravine which was too narrow to allow it to enter.

The steep-walled cut suddenly ended. The sides here were steep and smooth—a perfect cul-de-sac. Hammond turned, his brown fists clenched.

The walls hemming him in were perhaps fifteen feet above his head. The metal monster halted on the rim. A strange light blinked on in the nose of that creature, or mechanism. It probed down at him, spotlighting him. A giant foreleg, ending in a formidable pair of forceps, reached down along the light beam for him.

The focussing light, swinging along the opposite wall before steadying on Hammond, had revealed to the desperate research chemist a transverse fissure, barely wide enough to admit him. Hammond took the chance. The giant claw was but a foot above his head when he twisted, sprang away from the wall. The forcep jerked, swung after him. Hammond beat it to the fissure by a foot.

He didn't stop. He kept running, looking back over his shoulder to see if the monster was following. He didn't notice the fissure ended abruptly in space. Not until he suddenly felt himself treading empty air. Then he began to fall, turning slowly, like a slow motion diver in the newsreels.

HE fell a long way. In terms of feet, as he judged it, the drop was incredible. Below him a huge mass loomed out of a brown, heaving sea. Above him—he saw it, once, as he faced upward in his turning fall—he glimpsed what was a gigantic span of maroon earth, hundreds of feet thick, that was supported by the huge, maroon cliffs at either side.

It was from that span he had fallen!

A strange, numbing thought came to him, then, so incredible in its implication he discarded it. But it persisted, kept tapping at the back of his mind—

He was still in the *Crawfish*!

The thought was fantastic. Yet it was less incredible than if it were not true. The turreted tube, evidently, had sprayed an invisible ray that had so changed him in size that the antlike things he had been about to examine now loomed like colossi over him. The ridges and gullies and fumaroles were brush marks and paint bubbles in the maroon paint of the seat, and the towering cliffs were the boat sides. The high span from which he was falling must be nothing less than the boat seat!

And the huge, elliptical land mass toward which he was falling must be—

He landed then. The substance beneath his feet was soft, spongy. It broke his fall. Around him was a momentary red glow, as of the sun shining through a filter that blocked out all waves above the red band. He passed through slimy pools within the huge mass, and momentary revulsion gripped him. Then he emerged out into brief daylight, riding a huge disc to the brown, heaving sea.

He hit with a splash. Fathoms deep to him, he went directly to the bottom, as if he were composed of a substance many times heavier than lead. And he remained on the bottom. Not even his instinctive attempt to swim upward could lift him to the surface.

The ironic thought hit him then, as death stared at him with grinning face. The huge mass through which he had plunged must have been the body of one of the bluefish they had caught. Evidently, though incredibly reduced in size, his weight in relation to the earth's pull, was still one hundred and eighty pounds. And the brown, heaving sea at the bottom of which he now rested, was merely the bilge water of the *Crawfish*. And in the next minute or two he, Frank Hammond, was going to drown in it!

He turned, instinctively, and ran for the boat side. Again he felt the boat tip to his unbalancing weight. Overhead the bilge water rushed to lap high against his side.

There was danger that his weight would so tip the skiff that it would ship water from the Sound. But he had to chance it, or drown where he stood.

His lungs were nearly bursting when he came upon the dark, gigantic loom of

the boat side. And strangely, at this moment, the steep slant of the floor began to level—the bilge water washed back from the side.

The thought came to Hammond, then, that Peter Storm must be running for the opposite side of the boat, instinctively realizing the need of keeping this strange world on an even keel.

Lungs bursting, Hammond started the climb up the dark wall. Like some tiny mite, almost invisible to the naked eye, Hammond finally emerged from the bilge water. Aching lungs drew in great draughts of clean air.

Spent, still somewhat dazed by the incredible truth, he did not notice the eight-legged colossus that came down along the cliff toward him. Not until it loomed over him, and a giant claw reached down for him, did he become aware of it. And then it was too late.

He gasped, tried to dodge.

A giant forcep grasped him about the middle, and with a quick, deft motion another claw-like appendage clipped a small, parachute-like metal harness over his shoulders. Then the first forcep lifted him, easily, and drew him up to the metal monster where a round port dilated open and he was thrust inside.

THE huge claw withdrew, and the port closed. Hammond blinked his eyes. He was in a big room, the ceiling of which was transparent, letting in a subdued light. Ringing him, in a circle two deep, were warriors of an ancient era. Amazons, complete to breast plates and oval shields, cinctures and sandals. Lithe, beautiful, yet erect and disciplined, they watched him as a trainer watches a jungle cat on its first day in the arena.

Hammond waited. The thought came to him, now, that these were very modern Amazons. For beside the shield they carried a weapon that closely resembled a modern rifle. And on their shoulders each carried an identical parachute-like contrivance similar to the one fastened on Hammond.

The young chemist took a deep breath. He said: "What's the idea, girls? This some kind of a new game?"

The sound of his voice seemed to startle them. A golden haired warrior, perhaps

a minor officer, for she wore a green armband, made a short, quick gesture.

The ringing warriors closed in on Hammond. Instinct moved the young chemist's arms—the instinct to fight, to win free of this strange experience he could not understand. But crippling that instinct were the habits of civilization.

He couldn't bring himself to hit these girls, warriors or no.

Yet he tried to win free. He pushed the first two off their feet, whirled, and bucked the rest of the line with his shoulders. They parted under his assault. But with disciplined movement the others closed in and fairly smothered him under them.

He felt metal clasped about his arms and legs, and suddenly he was unable to struggle, to heave free of that pinning mass. Panting, his face grim, he subsided.

**T**HE Amazons reformed ranks. He was left with arms and legs chained in a manner that allowed him, when on his feet, to take short steps forward.

The officer with the green armband gestured again, and gave with it a verbal order. Her voice was musical, in a tongue entirely alien to Hammond.

Two warriors marched forward, bent, helped Hammond to his feet. The officer took hold of the free length of blue chain, and started to walk Hammond toward the far end of the big room.

Hammond followed. Behind him the two warriors kept pace, rifle-like weapons held ready.

A door dilated open in the wall, and Hammond found himself in a long, softly lighted runway. He was marched along this to another door, and motioned within.

The door closed behind him.

It was a small room, bare and blank on three sides save for a number of iron handgrips on the walls. The fourth wall was transparent. Hammond shuffled to it. At the same moment the floor under him pitched and rolled, and the clank of machinery rumbled through the iron monster.

He grasped the nearest handgrip, and clung. Looking out through the transparent wall, he could see that the monster tank (for now he guessed the eight-legged antlike thing to be) was climbing up the boat side to the seat.

The tank leveled off. Above him towered the outlines of the "big one." Scores of the monster tanks were climbing back up the parent side, to disappear in as many openings.

The tank which held Hammond moved steadily, nosed into its compartment. The door closed after them. The tank rumbled on across a large, dimly lighted room, more like some enormous storage garage, for Hammond could glimpse the bulks of dozens of the huge tanks along the far walls, and in one corner he saw several of what resembled fast, ultra streamlined, all metal planes.

The tank came to a halt. The door of Hammond's cell opened, and the officer with the two guards came in. Hammond was motioned to follow her out.

He was led out of the tank which was immediately maneuvered to its niche among the vague bulks along the wall. A door dilated open at the officer's approach, and they passed through it into another long, green lighted runway. They went along this for some distance, then turned into another room, as huge as the colossal garage into which the tank had entered.

Thousands of the wiry Amazons were swarming in through a hundred doorways to this room. Evidently they were members of the expedition which had been sent to locate and capture him, and which must have consisted of nearly a hundred of the strange, ambulatory war tanks.

The Amazon officer led him across this huge room which reminded Hammond of a railway or bus terminal, and into another corridor. It was then that the hugeness of the "big one" became evident to Hammond.

They marched through a number of huge rooms, climbed three spiral ramps, and popped into a half dozen transverse corridors. And only on these upper levels, in rooms that held banks of whirring machinery, did Hammond see the males.

They carried no weapons. They all wore white, collarless crew neck garments that resembled smocks which came down to their knees. They sported bearded chins and jowls, but smooth shaven upper lips. The beards were all trimmed to sharp points, and they looked alike as stenciled copies.

But here and there among them were

some with remarkable physical characteristics. Each of these occasional individuals had a tremendously large left arm, fully as big as one of his legs. It was carried crooked at the elbow, with the forearm held horizontally in front of him. The right arm, on the contrary, was spindly and underdeveloped. These males had thin, scraggy beards, and strange dull eyes that followed Hammond as he was marched past.

If the other males noticed him they gave no sign. They seemed completely subordinated in this huge craft.

The spiral ramps kept leading upward. Finally they reached a corridor with a transparent ceiling, and Hammond realized that he was now at the top of the strange craft. A moment later he was led before a door at either side of which stood a stiff Amazon guard.

The guards saluted the officer by raising the right hand to the heart. Then they stepped aside. The officer stared at the closed door. Her forehead furrowed slightly. Then she nodded. Turning, she removed the shackles from Hammond, stepped back.

The door dilated open. The officer made a sharp, unmistakable gesture with her right hand, and the armed guard took a stolid step forward.

Hammond shrugged. Ducking a little to clear the top of the doorway, he stepped inside.

**A** CROSS the well lighted room, close to the transparent prow of the ship, was a huge, metal desk. Papers and small charts lay scattered upon it. But Hammond's eyes scarcely noticed.

He stopped, just within the room, the door closing silently behind him. Then he took a deep breath, and grinned: "Now I know I must be dreaming!"

The girl behind the desk did not smile. She looked at him, solemnly, then a strange, quick fire leaped across her startlingly beautiful face. She lowered her gaze abruptly, and her hands stiffened on the desk. She rose, and when she looked again at Hammond there was a hardness, a piercing penetration to her sea-green eyes that seemed to probe like a surgeon's scalpel into Hammond's very brain. A fire seemed to spread, quickly, through his

mind, as though long dormant cells were stirring, growing to awareness.

And with it, impacting strangely on his ears, the girl spoke, her voice low and musical. "Earthman, your thoughts are unpleasant to me. I, Gena, commander of the spacecraft, *Vandar III*, with a million warriors at my disposal, am not for you."

Hammond's grin changed to a startled gape. Confusion moiled in his brain. How had she known what he was thinking? And where had she learned English! She spoke it like an American.

The girl smiled, as if hearing his confusion. She was a tall, lissome girl; a corn-yellow blond of remarkable beauty. But there was an imperiousness in her manner, a quiet dignity to her regard, a grace to her movements that set her above the Amazons that had captured Hammond. That she was a warrior also, albeit, the commanding officer of this strange craft, was evinced by her attire which was the same as that of the other female fighters. On a small table to her left was a shield, differing from the plain blue of the others by the single, glowing white star in its center. With it reposed one of the rifle-like weapons.

On her left arm she wore a metal band, like that of the minor officer that had escorted Hammond here. But this band was of gold, and it held the same symbol of high status, the single white star of glowing stone that writhed with a strange white fire.

Hammond took control of his confused thoughts. He said: "I'm sorry if I've offended you, Gena. But I can't control my thoughts, and they were sincere." His handsome face lighted with his quick, infectious grin. "You are very beautiful, and very desirable."

The quick fire leaped across the girl's face again, and in Hammond's mind there suddenly beat a tumultuous surge of emotions other than his own. Then the girl's face went sombre, and the strange surge in Hammond abruptly ceased. "You are a very impetuous young barbarian," she said, coldly. "But perhaps your uncouthness can be excused. You will indeed prove an interesting specimen to present to Aleea, the Queen Mother."

Hammond frowned. He had almost

forgotten the utter strangeness of the entire experience, but it came back to him now, and with it the clamor for explanation.

The girl read his thoughts. "I, Gena, am not of Earth. Nor did I, before you entered this room, know your language, or know that your people call this planet Earth and the planet from which I come Mars. All this, and as much of Earth and your civilization as you know I have probed from your mind while you stood there."

She came around the desk, smiling now. "Your thoughts are confused. You do not readily believe. Mars—impossible! No ship has yet been constructed that can negotiate the airless void of space—no *Earthian* craft!" she emphasized. "But we of Mars have."

Hammond looked about him, out through the transparent hull wall to the far low maroon cliffs that he knew were the boat sides. He shrugged. Fantastic or no, this was the reality, and with a true scientist's adaptable mind he accepted it.

"How is it then," he questioned calmly, "that the warriors that captured me did not learn my language, nor read my thoughts?"

Gena's imperial features held dignity. "I am a commander," she answered. "Which means that I am a thorough master of that which your scientists call ESP—extra-sensory perception—as well as its opposite, which they have not yet recognized, but which they might call EST—extra-sensory transmission. It takes a certain type of personality, even on Mars, and years of training to attain to the power to perceive what is in other minds, plus the power to transmit to them, selectively, and at will, that which I wish them to know, understand, or obey."

Hammond relaxed, his keen mind enjoying itself. "Then you are not speaking to me in American? Yet to me it seems you are talking my language."

Gena's eyes quickened. "Precisely. I am speaking the language of the mind. Your mind reinterprets what I say in the phonetic symbols you call American, due to speech habits, just as it interprets such phonetic symbols as thoughts and ideas. If you spoke another language

the written symbols and sounds conjured up by your mind would be different, but the thoughts and ideas conveyed would be the same."

Hammond frowned. "Then, if you and your people use only the language of the mind, how does it happen that I heard spoken words which I did not understand?"

"I did not say we use *only* the language of the mind. We have our own phonetic symbols; in fact, I am talking audibly to you now. When you first entered I probed your mind, and put you *en rapport* as you might call it, not only with our mind language, but with our thought symbols, so you now reinterpreted both as your own language."

Hammond shook his head. "But I still speak in American."

"No, you are only thinking in American. You are now vocalizing in our language as naturally as if you were speaking your tongue. Here, look at this chart."

HAMMOND glanced at the chart she held before him. It seemed written in English, though the ideas conveyed were somewhat startling and foreign, having to do with intricate calculation of space travel. Yet Hammond recalled that only a few moments before they had been in strange and unintelligible symbols.

He nodded, slowly, a little awed. "You have advanced far on Mars. And here on Earth we smugly pride ourselves on our knowledge, on a civilization that even now is tearing itself to shreds. Surely, you of Mars, with your advanced science, have succeeded in founding a better and more peaceful world."

The girl's eyes clouded, and for a moment her thought control slipped. Hammond had a wondering sensation of fear and anxiety.

"We have come far, Earthman," she nodded. "Evolution seems to have started from the same base on Mars, and taken the same general course as that of Earth. With variations, of course. We, the Metiphrons, the mammals of Mars, have achieved to high civilization. Our cities are united and at peace—among ourselves. Our science has wrought wondrous changes. We have crossed space, and we



have harnessed as well as condensed the atom. On Mars we are of normal size, which is to say we average about the size and weight of you Americans. This space ship, those tanks, our weapons—all weigh and bulk accordingly. But for space travel, and for certain doubtful ventures, we have condensed the atoms of our bodies and that of this craft and all our weapons, without changing their mass or qualitative characteristics. The electrical particles are all there, and in precisely the same proportion. But in each atom the particles are much closer together, moving in smaller orbits."

Hammond nodded. "Then I still weigh one hundred and eighty pounds?"

"You did, till your weight was reduced by the degravitator strapped to your back. Remove it, and your body, without changing size, will once more attract and be attracted by your planet sufficiently to weigh one hundred and eighty pounds. This ship, small as it no doubt appeared to you and your companion, weighs countless tons. Were it not for the giant degravitator in the central room it would plummet down to the ocean depths."

Hammond nodded, slowly. "With such science, and at peace among yourselves, you must be supreme on your planet. And yet—" His gaze shifted to shield and weapon on the small table. "You seem a warrior people."

Gena's face clouded. "Life is a struggle, Earthman. Forever and beyond, perhaps. We Metiphrons have achieved to unity and peace. But on Mars evolution took two parallel paths. That which culminated in the Metiphrons, my people, arising as on Earth from the lowly protozoa. And with it, keeping pace, that of the crustacean—culminating in the opposite life form of Mars—the Sediphrons. For centuries now they have fought us for mastery of the planet. Somewhat related to your arachnidæ, their later evolution has been consciously anthropomorphic, as they strove to imitate us in everything, even in bodily shape. Their motives?" The girl smiled bleakly. "The ancient motives of life—to enslave us, to be dominant on the planet, to infuse our blood with their own in order to speed their anthropomorphic evolution—and finally, to use as food those of us not

suitable for slaves or to bear their hybrid progeny.

"You can see why the very thought of them is repugnant to us. Why every female bears arms from infancy. And why we hoped to find aid, from the females here on Earth, for our fight to crush the Sediphrons."

Hammond nodded. "Then the Metiphron males don't bear arms?"

"Bear arms?" Gena smiled. "The males attend to our machinery, take care of the incubators and watch our young until they are able to take care of themselves. But fight?" She shook her head, as if the idea were strange and almost laughable.

Hammond grinned. "Things are somewhat changed around on Earth, Gena. The women do plenty of scrapping here, of course—and there's some who would insist they have it over the males, most of the time, in domestic life. But the really big blowoffs, like the ones going on in Europe and in Asia—they're still strictly for males."

The girl commander shrugged, dubiously. "Men are too phlegmatic to make good fighters."

She broke off, caught by a warning red signal that suddenly flashed to life on a complicated instrument board to left of the desk. For the space of several seconds she concentrated, her pretty brow slightly furrowed. When she turned to Hammond there was a worried frown in her eyes.

"My audiodetector indicates the proximity of a strange space ship. Its commander does not answer my telepathic inquiries. Something is definitely wrong. I must place my sub-officers on the alert. Also Ardiné, my division commander, who is conducting the search for your friend, Peter Storm."

Once more she concentrated on the issuance of telepathic orders.

**T**HE floor suddenly lurched violently beneath them. Hammond thrown off balance, went down to his hands. He twisted erect, supple as a cat, and reached out a supporting arm for Gena, who had been thrown against the desk. A strange thrill tingled through him at the softness of her.

The girl was half turned, facing the transparent prow wall. She said: "Zuggoth, the Sediphron King!" There was fear in her, momentarily. Then she stiffened, her brow furrowing in telepathic concentration, evidently issuing orders to the defense posts of the *Vandar III*.

Hammond, glancing over her shoulder, saw that a second craft, exactly like the one he was in, had alighted on the boat seat beside them. Holes were already dilating open in the gleaming side. Ugly muzzles, huge and ominous to Hammond's changed perspective, thrust through these holes. A moment later the flash and roar of heavy artillery shattered the quiet.

At the same time hundreds of the eight legged war tanks swarmed out of holes in the lower part of the space cruiser. Some of these charged toward the *Vandar III*, and were immediately met in combat by the divisions Gena had ordered out to assist sub-commander Ardiné in her search for Peter Storm. Others scuttled off to engage the separated scouters.

Gena seemed to have forgotten Hammond. She watched the heavy electronic artillery from the hostile war cruiser, her mind sending telepathic command after command to the various sections of the ship. The *Vandar's* own artillery was firing, but spasmodically, as if trouble was aboard. Gena's brow furrowed.

HAMMOND watched the strange battle. The ambulant tanks, he saw, were not only fighting with similar guns of lighter calibre, but were engaging each other with their clawed feet, like crustaceans. The guns did not fire projectiles, but flashes of electronic force which resembled lightning. The armor of the space ships held under the primary blasts, but was eroded by them, and repeated bolts, striking in the same spot, would eventually break through.

The quick flame of combat surged through Hammond as he watched. "Why don't you maneuver the ship?" he shouted, forgetting the girl-commander could read his thoughts. "Circle over them, come down on them from some blind spot. You can't win in this position. They've got more guns!"

The girl faced him, as if suddenly aware he was by her side. Her features

were white, and there was strain in her, in her flashing eyes.

"I can't!" she replied. "There were traitors among the men in my crew. Sediphrons, disguised as hybrids. They have seized the control room, and wrecked many of our big guns. We've lost!"

"No!" Hammond cried, roughly. "The control room! Maybe we can still take over, if there's not too many of them. If they haven't wrecked the driving mechanism we might still get away. Where is it, Gena?"

The girl looked at him, strangely. "The males of Earth are indeed a different breed," she commented. Then: "Come! Perhaps we have a chance."

She gathered up her shield and electronic rifle, and headed for what seemed a blank wall. Hammond followed. A door suddenly dilated open before Gena, and they passed through, hurried down a short, deserted ramp that spiraled downward for about a hundred feet.

It ended at an open doorway. Beyond, in the midst of electronic crackle and strange battle shouts, a dozen hybrids were holding the control room against a company of Amazons trying to force their way in from another doorway across the room. Two of Gena's operators were on the floor, evidently dead. Three others struggled in the grip of the scraggy bearded, huge-armed "fifth column" hybrids.

Other hybrids were smashing the delicate controls. These saw Gena and Hammond first. They swung around, reaching for electronic rifles.

Gena succeeded in killing two of them. Hammond, closing in quickly behind her, noticed that the rifles were fired, not from the shoulder, but held with the stock beneath the arm, and maneuvered with one hand while the shield was held with the others.

Before she could fire again Gena became the target for two of the traitors. She caught the flash from one rifle on her shield, but could not raise it in time to ward off the other. The electronic bolt caught her squarely on her helmet.

With a muffled growl Hammond charged. The scraggy bearded traitor fired hurriedly, evidently disconcerted by sight of a bronzed, muscled male diving for

him. The blast seared lightly across Hammond's back muscles. Then his hurtling body smashed into his opponent, hurling him down.

He swore monotonously, viciously, clubbed with savage fists at the bearded, screaming face. His victim screamed for aid.

At the next instant a wave of the fighting Amazons, evidently spurred to frenzy by sight of their fallen leader, surged forward, blasting into the room.

Hammond clung to the struggling saboteur he had floored. The Sediphron had lost rifle and shield, and was gouging at Hammond's eyes with the fingers of his dwarfed right hand. The other, huge and leg-like, was locked behind the chemist's neck in a bone crushing grip.

Hammond's shoulder muscles writhed. He thrust his right hand up to a scraggy bearded chin. To his surprise, not only the chin but the whole face came away, revealing another beneath it. A hideous, crab-like face with popping eyes that stood out on stalks. It was covered with a green chitinous armor.

Startled, the Sediphron "fifth columnist" relaxed its grip on his neck. Hammond wrenched free. His hand clamped down on the huge arm.

The Sediphron surged back, leaving the artificial limb in the chemist's hand. A huge, toothed claw was revealed. The Sediphron surged in, reaching for Hammond.

The Earthman twisted, a faint sneer writhing his lips. The Sediphron was unbelievably clumsy. Hammond caught the descending claw and gave a sharp, quick twist. The entire limb came off in his hands, broken cleanly at the shoulder joint. Swinging the heavy limb in a swift moulinet the Earthman brought it down with crushing force beneath the popping eyes of his adversary. It crashed through the chitinous skull as if it were an eggshell.

Hammond whirled back to the fallen girl-commander, bent by her limp body. Her fallen rifle caught his eye, and he reached for it, sensing the swift swirl of battle swing toward him.

His fingers fell short. A numbing pain lashed through his head, bringing quick blackness.

## IV

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly to Hammond. He felt himself being carried. But it was the sharp barked order that lingered in his mind, that seemed to rift the blackness that shrouded his aching brain.

His eyes opened. He found himself looking up into the hideous, crablike face of a Sediphron who carried him by the shoulders.

The sharp, imperious voice came again, halting Hammond's carriers. The young chemist was put on his feet, flanked immediately by a half dozen Sediphrons with menacing electronic rifles.

Hammond stiffened. He was back in Gena's big observation and chart room. A horde of armed Sediphrons filled the room, drawn up in stiff military array.

Behind the metal desk sat a huge manlike crustacean, deep green in color. An enormous, toothed claw rested before him on the scattered flight charts.

The crablike mouth moved constantly. Words drummed against Hammond's ear, in a language he strangely understood. "Bring in the other Earth specimen, Vard. And the Metiphron sub-commander, Ardiné."

Hammond turned. Only then did he see Gena, flanked by a Sediphron guard, facing the hideous crustacean behind the desk. Their eyes met, and a warm surge of thankfulness enveloped Hammond.

"Thank God, Gena!" he thought, forcefully, "you're unharmed."

The girl-commander smiled wanly. "This is the end, Earthman. Zuggoth has won."

The crablike thing behind the desk teetered a little in the chair. His thoughts interrupted harshly. "Not the end, Gena, for you. You and your sub-commander will round out my harem back on Syrrvi. This daring, primitive Earthian male and his companion will be minutely examined."

Back of Hammond a door dilated open. Grim-faced, with a gash over his left eye, stocky Peter Storm was pushed into the room by a squad of Sediphrons. A flashing-eyed brunette, reaching barely to Storm's shoulder, walked by his side, head erect.

Storm's grim face relaxed as he saw

Hammond. His mouth cracked into a wry grin. "So they got you, too, Frank!" he said in English.

Hammond nodded, gravely. "How'd they get you, Pete?"

Storm shrugged, looked down at the brunette by his side. "Ardiné finally cornered me, with one of those eight-legged tanks. *Under a nail in the boot seat!*" Storm shook his head, as if the thing was crazy. "We were heading back for the 'big one' when the other space cruiser landed on the seat and started blasting. Three Sediphron tanks cornered us and wrecked our vehicle. Ardiné," he glanced down at her again, in a manner that flicked understanding into Hammond's eyes, "put up a good fight. But they finally got us, and marched us here. Looks like this Zuggoth has taken the ship. A division of his blitzkrieg panzers are mopping up—"

Zuggoth's harsh order suddenly obtruded. "Silence!"

Storm shrugged. The Sediphron warriors in the room stiffened expectantly.

The hideous crablike mouth worked. "Imperial orders of Zuggoth, first in command over Kulaav, land of the Sediphrons! All the males of the *Vandar III* shall be immediately put to death, and stored in the cargo rooms, along with the female warriors who have been killed in battle. These we shall use for food on our journey back to Syrrvi. The unharmed females shall be divided among you, according to rank, and placed in your harem. All but these two—" His huge claw lifted to indicate Gena and Ardiné. "They are reserved for the First One!"

A low, satisfied beat of sound came from the attentive warriors.

"The machinery of the *Vandar III* shall be immediately repaired for our triumphant return to Kulaav. These two strange males, natives of Earth, I personally wish to dissect in the laboratory. Important information concerning future forays in greater force to this green planet may be obtained in this manner."

The huge claw waved imperiously. "I, Zuggoth, first in command, have spoken."

For a moment there was silence. In that stillness Hammond's desperate gaze sought Storm's. Death, so casually pro-

nounced, death on the dissecting table. It was monstrous.

It was Storm who moved first. He took a quick sidestep, and swung, without preamble. His still taped, solid fist crushed through the green chitinous armor of the nearest guard's face. Then he was whirling, striking again, and Hammond was joining him, lashing at the nearest guard, trying to slash a path to Zuggoth, first in command.

It was a bitter battle while it lasted. Hammond nearly made it. He saw Zuggoth rear back in alarm, half lift his electronic rifle— Then a clubbed weapon sank the fighting chemist to his knees, and a moment later he was smothered under a pile of bodies.

Chains were shackled about his wrists and ankles. He was jerked erect to face Zuggoth, who had relaxed again in his chair. The ball-like eyes of the Sediphron king glared at him.

"Take them to the dissecting rooms at once!" he ordered. "There shall I cut the wild life from them, slowly, with much pain!"

Hammond shook the hair from his eyes and met Storm's battered grin with one of his own. Then his gaze sought Gena's.

The girl's face was white, her lips trembling. Her thoughts reached him, heavy with regret. "Goodbye, Earthman!"

The chemist's lips went grim. "Goodbye, Gena," he answered. Then a Sediphron guard shoved him roughly toward the door, after Storm.

THE dissecting room was high-walled, white, full of strange apparatus that only vaguely resembled similar machines of Earth. There was the Martian fluoroscope with which Storm and Hammond were minutely examined, and notes taken on a Martian "talkie"—evidently a highly advanced type camera with sound track arrangement which recorded that revealed by the fluoroscope and the comments of the observer.

The fluoroscope was a vast improvement over the earth type. Hammond, watching Storm being examined with it, saw that any part of his companion's internal anatomy could be brought into sharp focus on the screen. Heart, lungs, bone structure, arteries. Each was

minutely examined, probed into—the while the Martian “talkie” hummed softly.

A number of strange drugs were needled into them as they stood behind the fluoroscope. Drugs that burned like fire, contorting their bodies with convulsions, and which were immediately eased by the introduction of a neutralizing drug. Others that paralyzed motor nerves, and that deadened the sensory cells. All was recorded by the laboratory scientists.

Finally, Hammond and Storm were strapped on the dissecting tables. A blinding, white light beat down on their almost naked bodies.

Zuggoth came into the laboratory then. For a few moments he and the laboratory scientists held a consultation. Hammond, craning his neck, could see the Sediphron king’s crablike mouth work, see the ball-like eyes wave on the end of their stalks.

The Martian “talkie” was run for him, the picture sequences thrown against a special screen that held the scenes clear without the dimming of the bright laboratory lights. Zuggoth watched attentively, only his revolting eyes swaying.

Then he waved his huge claw. The “talkie” was shut off. Huge, hideous, he walked to the dissecting tables. A smaller table, holding a gleaming array of scalpels and cutting instruments of all types was wheeled to his side.

He turned to Hammond. His dwarfed right hand, humanlike, with tiny fingers, picked up a knife.

AT that moment a hidden bell began to clang incessantly. Zuggoth paused, half turned. The laboratory assistants fidgeted. One of them said: “It is the alarm signal, First One. Something has happened in the ship!”

Zuggoth hesitated. Then he flung the knife down on the small table. “Keep guard over the Earthians, Cuzzvi,” he snapped to the head scientist. “I will see what’s causing the trouble!”

Hammond’s tightened muscles relaxed: the sweat on his forehead felt cool. Unexpectedly, he had been given a breathing spell. But for how long?

Instinctively he tested the flexible, silken straps that held him to the table. They did not give, though his muscles bunched

and strained. There was a silken thong about his neck, holding his head down. He turned his head, slowly, till he faced Storm.

“Looks like our friend Zuggoth never heard of an anesthetic,” he muttered, with an attempt at casualness he did not feel. “Funny thing, Pete, it still doesn’t seem real. All this, I mean. Just a few hours ago we were in a skiff, fishing for blues. Now—”

Pete managed a grin. “Now we’re still in the boat. Only it isn’t—”

Looking toward Hammond, he was facing the laboratory door, and he saw them first. Hybrids, armed with shield and electronic rifles. Two of them. One of them carried red and green insignia on its dwarfed right arm.

Hammond turned his head, warned by the look on Storm’s face. The laboratory head, Cuzzvi, saw the intruders a moment later. He drew up stiffly, evidently noting the rank of the foremost hybrid. Then, all at once, he whirled, gave a short cry of warning to his assistants, and reached for an electronic rifle in a wall rack.

The rifles in the hands of the strange hybrids lanced their electronic bolts. Cuzzvi staggered against the fluoroscope, his green face fused into black mess. The other two assistants made a dash for a door in the far end of the room. Neither reached it.

A moment later the hybrid officer was bending over Hammond, releasing him. The other hybrid was doing the same for Storm.

Hammond’s mind whirled. He said: “Thanks, boys. We sure—”

He gasped, his fingers tightening on the hybrid’s huge arm. The scraggy bearded face had been pushed back, revealing beneath the disguise Gena’s beautiful features.

“Come!” she said sharply, drawing forth a similar hybrid disguise from within the garment. “Get into this, Earthman. We have no time to lose. We must get away from here before Zuggoth returns.”

Hammond and Storm obeyed with alacrity. They got into the hybrid costumes Zuggoth’s Sediphrons had used to plant themselves in Gena’s ship. They padded out the huge left arm with a

soft, cottonlike material they found in the laboratory. Ardiné helped them in the task.

In the meantime Gena disappeared in a closet-like room at the far end of the laboratory. When she returned she held two strange-looking metal objects, like long, dull tubes with a dial face and a knob. She tucked these away under her costume without explaining.

Ardiné, also, had been foraging. She came back to them with what seemed like two small flashlights. Her voice was hurried. "The size reducing and expanding ray guns. Perhaps we'll have use for them."

Gena nodded. Her voice was quick, determined. "Earthmen, Ardiné and I are going to make an attempt to capture Zuggoth's ship, and escape back to Mars. The *Vandar III* is being repaired, but it will take hours. Our only hope is the unharmed Sediphron craft."

Hammond caught up one of the electronic rifles. "We're with you, Gena," he said grimly. "Lead the way!"

THE door dilated open as they approached. A moment later they were marching stiffly down a long corridor.

Hammond gripped the electronic rifle he had taken from Cuzzvi, his eyes hard under the strange optical openings in the hybrid mask. The ship was swarming with Sediphrons, searching for the girls who had escaped from Zuggoth's harem. At any moment—

As if in answer to his worst fears a Sediphron squad appeared from a side corridor. They halted abruptly. The leader eyed the insignia on Gena's arm. Then he raised his huge left arm at a diagonal across his chest, evidently in salute.

Gena's thoughts rasped: "The engine rooms. The First One orders. The escaped Metiphrons have been sighted."

The Sediphron guard wheeled, went down the corridor at a shuffling gait. Hammond relaxed, feeling sweat in the palms of his hands, on his brow.

"This way!" Gena ordered. They cut down the side corridor from which the guard had emerged, and took a long ramp downward. Several times they met squads of the ugly crustaceans, but their

disguise and Gena's harsh commands got them by.

They were well down in the ship, cutting across a big machine room, deserted by the Metiphron workers who tended the whirring machines when Gena halted. Ardiné and the Earthmen waited while she darted a long aisle and vanished into a smaller room beyond where a huge, turbine-like thing of glinting metal spun with high-pitched hum.

The girl-commander had withdrawn one of the dull metal tubes before leaving them. She turned the knob, which moved the dial hand, evidently setting it to desired position.

Several minutes later she was back without the tube.

Ardiné's voice was shaken. "Gena—how long?"

"Four hours!" Gena replied. "Four hours until the degravitator of the *Vandar III* blows up." There was regret in her voice.

Hammond kept his silence. But the need for haste now, dogged them as they followed ramp after ramp down into the ship.

"Hurry!" Gena said again and again.

Some of the route was familiar to Hammond, who remembered being led along it on his way to Gena's navigation room. He was sure of it when they stepped into the huge garage where row upon row of war tanks stood dark and unmoving along the walls.

There was no guard about. Across the room a tank was just rumbling in, its eight legs clanking metallicly. Evidently it was one of the Sediphron scouts that had been combing the boat for any of Gena's tanks that might have escaped the surprise attack.

Gena led the way swiftly. They clambered into one of the squat parked vehicles. A moment later it clanked out, passing the larger one that was sidling into parking position nearer the door.

They weren't stopped. A moment later they were climbing down the side of the "big one" to the boat seat, and scurrying across the ridges and gullies that were strewn with the wrecks of Sediphron and Metiphron war vehicles.

Through the observation prow Hammond could see the vague maroon



cliff that was the near boat side. For a moment longing assailed him—longing to be in his own world again, to be out of this fantastic world of ultra-smallness. His thoughts turned to the ray guns Ardiné carried, then he dismissed the thought that came to him.

He owed Gena and Ardiné his life; and for what it would be worth he was with them in this suicidal attempt to wrest from Zuggoth and his crustacean horde the huge battle craft that had followed the *Vandar III* across space.

Zuggoth's ship finally loomed up, like a colossus over the small tank. Unhesitatingly Gena sent the ambulatory vehicle up the spiny side. The Sediphron craft was an exact copy of Gena's ship, and the girl-commander guided the small tank unerringly to one of the dilating doors that opened to a telephathic command.

The huge room they entered was an exact duplicate of that which they had left in the *Vandar III*. A Sediphron guard watched them slide the small tank into parking space. Then his telephathic order crackled into their thoughts.

"Who enters the flagship of the First One? Answer."

Hammond kept his mind blank. He saw Gena's brow furrow slightly. The words seemed to sound in his ears. "Volkzv, second in command of hybrid Intelligence. Searching flagship on order of Zuggoth, the First One. Gena, commander of the *Vandar III*, and her sub-commander, Ardiné, have escaped with the two Earthmen. All squads dispatched to the search. Zuggoth orders!"

There was a moment of hesitation. The hideous Sediphron squad leader's eyes swayed gently. Then his reply came. "Proceed, Volkzv. We stay to guard the tank room."

Hammond kept a grip on his thoughts. Stiff-legged, marching with the shuffling gait of the hybrids, he followed Gena and Ardiné and Storm out of the war tank, and across the vast chamber to the corridor.

Zuggoth's ship was practically deserted. Evidently only a skeleton guard had been left behind. All others had been ordered out to battle, and were now concentrated in the captured Metiphron space cruiser.

Hammond breathed a sigh of relief. It looked as if Gena's desperate plan might succeed.

The sudden clanging of a huge bell somewhere in the ship's bowels stiffened them. Storm's quick voice sounded. "The alarm signal! The tank room guard must have suspected—"

"Come!" Gena snapped. "The control room. If we can take over, and seal ourselves in—"

THEY hurried along the corridor, ducking into side rooms to avoid being sighted by squads of the green crustaceans that suddenly sprouted into being.

Thus, playing a grim game of hide and seek, they finally made their way up to the control room. But here they ran into a huge, massed group of the Sediphrons, who had evidently been ordered to await any such move on the part of the desperate fugitives.

The lurid crackle of electronic bolts fused against the corridor walls. Storm and Hammond worked their rifles with grim methodicalness, blasting a half dozen of the green crustaceans into oblivion. But there were too many of them. They had to fall back along the corridor.

Then Ardiné received a partial shock from a glancing bolt that dropped her. Storm sprang for her, heedless of the bursting bolts, and caught her up in his strong arms. Gena and Hammond covered him under a steady flare of bolts.

With Storm ahead of them they turned and ran.

It was up to Gena. The Earthmen followed blindly, lost in the bewildering maze of ramps, rooms and corridors.

As if in a grim nightmare they fought their way back through the ship, escaping annihilation many times by Gena's unerring knowledge of dilating doors that gave temporary safety.

Once Hammond saw Gena glance down at her chronometer, and he felt the rise of alarm in her thoughts before she blanked them out. And the chemist remembered then the time-bomb she had planted in the degravitator room of the *Vandar III*.

They crossed a momentarily deserted corridor, Storm still carrying the unconscious Ardiné, and went into a long room

that held a maze of long metal pipe overhead and squat machinery with smaller feeders leading up to the huge conductors.

Gena's thoughts came to Hammond as they paused here. "If we *must* die, let us at least take Zuggoth and his hideous horde with us. I can't let them get back to Mars now."

Hammond said: "Gena! Wait!"

But the lithe, young Amazon was already running along a row of banked machinery, withdrawing the second time-bomb from under her hybrid disguise. In the far wall a green light glowed as she approached. A door dilated open, and a Sediphron appeared in the opening.

For a moment he hesitated, stalk eyes swaying toward Gena. Then suspicion fused to purpose, and he swung his electronic rifle to target her.

Hammond's rifle lashed out first. Gena scarcely slowed in her run. She stepped over the crustacean's green body, and vanished into the degravitator room.

Sweat gathered on Hammond's brow as he waited, rifle held tight in his right hand. Storm was stroking Ardiné's forehead, his face grim. The high-pitched hum of the giant degravitator filled the room.

Then Gena returned, swiftly, tearing off her hybrid disguise. "One hour, Earthmen!" she said, unevenly, her eyes dark with the terrible strain. "One hour, and then we go down with Zuggoth and his hideous horde!"

"No!" Hammond's voice was rough. He ripped the disguise from him, flung it aside. Bronzed and rangy, his square jaw set, he faced the girl-commander. "You've handled this so far, Gena. But we're not giving up. We're getting out of here if we have to blast our way through every foot!"

**H**IS ringing cry seemed to whip hope into Gena. The strain in her white face seemed to ease, and a strange smile touched her full lips.

"Earthman, I think I shall like your breed. It does not easily give up!"

They turned away, crossed the huge room just as a squad of Sediphrons burst in at the other end. Hammond dropped behind, his rifle covering the burdened Storm and Gena, the girl he loved.

In a swift rearguard engagement, they

fought their way out of the room. Gena's aimed electronic bolt fused the hidden mechanism of the dilating door through which they escaped, momentarily holding up the rush of the hideous crustaceans.

"The tank rooms!" Hammond barked, taking command. "You know how to reach one of them, Gena?"

The girl nodded. Tensed, grim-faced, Hammond followed the girl, keeping Storm and Ardiné between them, electronic rifle held ready.

A small Sediphron squad patrolled the area, evidently on the alert for such a break. But the sudden appearance of the Earthmen and the girls caught them by surprise.

There were eight of them, and four went down to the combined fire of Gena and Hammond before they could train their rifles. Then Storm, laying Ardiné on the hard floor, took a hand.

Only one of that crustacean squad emerged from that withering fire. He succeeded in reaching a huge wall switch. A moment later the huge bell clanged its harsh alarm through the ship.

Hammond killed him, without regret.

They took the nearest war tank, a small, fast scout vehicle. Gena sent it clattering toward the far wall just as Zuggoth and a horde of Sediphrons burst into the room.

The electronic rifle bolts splattered harmlessly against the armor of the speeding tank. Unharmed the fugitives passed through the dilating door, and dipped down the side of the huge space craft.

Hammond hung on to the hand grips, watching Storm. The blond American held Ardiné in the curve of his strong arm, anxiety in his face. Only when the brunette began to stir, open her eyes, did relief finally ease the grimness of Storm's face.

The girl smiled up at him, her arms tightening. Hammond took his gaze away from the oblivious pair, and peered through the observation windows.

Gena was guiding the small tank along the huge ledge that was the boat side.

Back of them a score of bigger war tanks were following. Huge rays were blasting at them, burning scars in the ledge about them.

The small tank finally dipped down the boat side onto the far seat. For a

moment they were safe, out of range of the bigger tank batteries.

Gena brought the tank to an abrupt halt. "Our only chance!" she snapped. "We must use the size-expanding ray!"

They clambered quickly out. Far across the void between seats the "big ones" loomed. Nearer, coming toward them along the heaving boat side, clattered the Sediphron war tanks.

For a brief moment Gena's eyes mirrored a deep regret. Then she set the adjustment on her ray gun, and turned it on Hammond, while Ardiné did the same to Storm.

The familiar, whirling darkness, the bitter cold, claimed Hammond.

The darkness faded. He found himself facing Storm on the boat seat. The skiff was rocking crazily. Hammond teetered, stumbled back into the stern, and at the same moment Ardiné and Gena appeared.

A wave shipped over the side, washing tiny, antlike things that a moment before had loomed as colossal war tanks, into the bottom of the boat. And at the same moment Gena stiffened.

Thrusting from a turret in the Sediphron space craft appeared a small, glinting tube, similar to the one Gena had used to change them to tiny mites. In another moment they would experience again the sickening change to ultra-smallness.

The twin reports, like small firecrackers going off inside the "big ones," cut across Hammond's instinctive yell to dive overboard. The space cruisers on the boat seat, with the degravitators gone, seemed suddenly sucked down with irresistible force. They crashed through the seat, through the bottom of the skiff, and vanished in a swirl of water.

**T**HE *Crawfish* foundered, precipitating Hammond and his companions into the Sound. Hammond stroked instinctively to Gena's side, but the girl was as good a swimmer as he.

Ardiné and Storm swam alongside, and together they idled, looking back to where the *Crawfish* barely showed between swells, her thwarts awash.

"That's the end of Zuggoth and his

crustacean horde!" Storm remarked with relief. "Both ships must be buried deep in the muck and rock of the Sound!"

Gena's eyes clouded. Hammond had the sudden knowledge she was thinking of the Amazon warriors that had gone down with the *Vandar II*. Yet he knew, too, that it was better this way, than the more horrible fate that had been in store for them.

Gena stroked closer, her shoulder brushing his. She was still staring at the bobbing skiff, a strange half-fearful doubt tightening her wet face. Hammond sensed the trend of her thoughts.

The occupants of the pursuing war tanks, unfitted for water travel, must have surely drowned. But the huge space craft were water tight. It might be that Zuggoth and his crustacean horde, buried in the muck of the Sound, by their tremendous weight relative to their size, would yet succeed in repairing the degravitator of his ship and win free before death overtook them.

Hammond thrust the chill apprehension from him. He grinned reassuringly as Gena looked up at him, eyes dark with uncertainty—with sudden loneliness. She was no longer master of a million warriors—commander of a mighty ship of space. She was just a girl, now, soft and lovely and somewhat afraid.

"Frank," she said softly, tremulously. "What is it like—on Earth? We are lost, Ardiné and I—"

"Not lost, Gena," Frank answered, his voice serious. Over the girl's wet shoulder, in the west, he could see the swollen red orb of sun setting behind the wooded island. He saw farther, into tomorrow, and after. To his friends in the lab—to a story he knew would be incredulously received—to a world he and Storm would have to try to explain to these girls from across the star hung void.

"You'll be with me, Gena," he said, his voice gentle. "As my wife. And perhaps some day, with your knowledge, and Ardiné's—"

The girl smiled, and followed the line of his upward glance. The shadows were lengthening across the heaving Sound. But in the still, flushed sky a pin point of light beckoned, like a smiling answer—the brilliant disc of glowing Mars.



# THE VIZIGRAPH

**M**ARTIANS, Venusians, Saturnians, Neptunians and Jerseyites—you're invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigraphs helpful and interesting.

This is it, you Vizifanners, issue Number One, Volume Two, of *PLANET STORIES*; and, we sincerely believe, one of the best. This is the Anniversary Milepost toward which we have been building these past three years; and now we feel that we have come of age, in a field that is the most wide-awake and specialized of all fiction.

We're proud of *PLANET STORIES*, and we're continually striving to make it a better magazine. We buy the cream of the crop in stories, use the illustrations of the better artists—and, of course, print the letters of the Vizifanners. We try to give you a varied assortment of fiction and features, thus creating what we believe to be a magazine unique in the science-fiction field.

And that, of course, brings up the subject closest to our editorial hearts—the publishing of *PLANET STORIES* at closer intervals. Have you read the announcement on page 57? That announcement will tell you of our plans to go bi-monthly with *PLANET STORIES*. We will be doing our share to make this the best magazine in its field—but you readers will have to be the judge of that, for only by the sales will we be able to tell if the move is an intelligent one.

So drop *PLANET STORIES* a letter, giving your views and ideas, making the missive constructive; and we'll try to incorporate your thoughts into *PLANET STORIES*, thus making it the magazine that is tops on your reading list.

Remember, your wishes govern the policy of *PLANET STORIES*, so use your best judgment when writing. And we hope you will still be with us twelve issues from now, when you can help cut our editorial birthday cake again. Until the next issue of *PLANET STORIES*, then, *au revoir!*

By the by, the winners of the Fall Vizigraph voting are:  
I—Hidley — II—Moskowitz — III—Maxwell

## WE'RE PROBABLY WRONG—

Normal, Illinois,  
August 3, 1942.

DEAR EDITOR:

In reference to your Fall, 1942, issue of *PLANET STORIES*.

For quite some time a slowly-forming structure of adverse criticism on certain aspects of the magazine has been growing within me. This criticism covers several fields and with your kind permission I should like to take a few moments of your time to enumerate them.

First, there is the striking matter of titles and captions. It occurs to me, and this is more than a well-founded suspicion, that you deliberately entitle the various stories with titles that sound dynamic when read aloud for the sole purpose of capturing the imagination and enthusiasm of the younger, grade- and high-school readers; although it is quite likely that the titles do not do justice

to the average high-school intelligence, at that. The titles seldom do justice to the story they are used on.

Consider, as a prime example, Tucker's "Prison Planet" in this issue. It calls for a considerable stretch of imagination to find a sound basis for that title in the story itself. I certainly found nothing therein that gave the impression it was a prison planet in any semasiological sense of the word, "Prison" because there was naught but a surface craft to cross the void in?; "prison" because a character was more or less marooned there (for antisocial reasons at that?). I'm afraid I cannot see your point, other than that of a sheer desire for sensationalism—of a questionable nature.

No, if you please, I would much prefer titles to be of a sounder base. And on that identical side of the ledger are the curious "mistakes" in the captions accompanying those titles. Again, please, let "Prison Planet" serve as example.

"To remain on Mars meant death from agonizing space-sickness. . . ." It definitely states in the text that appendicitis is the villain of the plot; by what leave or license do you transform that to space-sickness? Several hundred thousand humans on this Earth have not as yet traveled in space—yet they have given up their vermiform tubes, to remain among the living. It is to be wondered upon what would be their reactions to learn they were suffering from space-sickness?

" . . . with a traitorous Ganymedian for its pilot." There, sir, you have departed from the straight and narrow in an appalling manner. Unless I read the text while under the influence of intoxicants, the gentleman who piloted the craft was neither traitorous nor a Ganymedian. He was simply a blacklisted Centaurian. Really, this is too much. It is a common error in a great number of your captions; instances of it are noticeable in almost every issue.

I do not know whether to ascribe such to an over-zealous caption writer or a shiftless, underpaid copy reader. Certainly, someone is at fault and the blame devolves, in the end, upon the editor. True, these grapes I have picked are small ones, but the great number of small grapes pluckable in each issue rapidly become a sizable bunch. I do believe, in all seriousness, that some different policy should be instituted to correct these faults. Even at the expense of those eye-catching phrases calculated to ensnare the grade-school reader. I'll wager there are other adults than myself who read the magazine.

Of equal importance, and deserving equal criticism, are the letters . . . or some of them, in the Vizigraph. In your foreword to the letters, you state you are desirous of receiving constructive, critical pieces, presumably with an eye for building a better magazine. I greatly fear most of the letters you have printed are blatantly antagonistic to that which you have expressly requested. They are, in short, one per cent sense and ninety-nine per cent piffle. (I should like to use a much stronger word but I fear it is unprintable.)

Singling out the letter by Lesser, of Brooklyn, I have broken it down into thirty-seven separate paragraphs. I find it an absolute, incredible fact that twenty-four of those paragraphs were sheer hog-wash—the acme of nothingness—piffle! The remaining thirteen paragraphs, if woven together in connecting fashion, would provide a sensible, criticizing, constructive missive; something resembling a definite guidepost for

future editorial plans. Those useless twenty-four paragraphs were sickening. Have you no other mail?

A number of the letter writers are guilty of the same fault. It appears as if they were more desirous of putting rambling, useless, communications in your pages dealing with slogans, trademarks, tags and advice on the fine art of kissing babies than they were of contributing something useful and constructive. Is this your mail?

In closing, two captions to those letters are worth repeating. "Do Stfans Have Minds?" and "Fantasy Readers Unbalanced?" A casual onlooker will quickly concur. He can but arrive at no other decision.

I am not interested in your illustrative awards nor do I care if the letter is printed. My sole object was constructive criticism. I only hope I have succeeded, and am not considered vituperative.

Sincerely,

LOYAL M. SANFORD.

## BUT WE COULD BE RIGHT

Doggone it, Mr. Sanford, your letter upset the PLANET staff enough so that it was necessary to check the whys and wherefores of the faults you mentioned. But, after delving a bit, hither and yon, we found a few things that might be pertinent to the matter.

First, as to the title. That is entirely an arbitrary matter that has merits for both sides. A title, as you say, is used to capture the imagination of the reader. And we agree with you upon that, for the only purpose of a title is to titillate the imagination for reading, much as the delectable odor of frying chicken stimulates the various digestive glands. And as to the "Prison" definition—well, any place, from which an escape is comparatively impossible, is a prison, in many senses of the word.

Now, as to the "space-sickness" mentioned in the caption. Sickness is defined roughly as an illness, as any condition of the body that is maleficent to good health. Therefore, sickness is correct. And on page 73, lines 42 and 43 of the second column, you will find a definite statement that qualifies the sickness as nothing more or less than *space-appendicitis*.

Thirdly, you quote, "—with a traitorous Ganymedian as its pilot." Perhaps we did stray a bit from the narrow when we termed him a "traitor"; but then again, he was so designated throughout the story, until the very last. However, we will admit that we did crib a bit on that word.

But—

As to our calling "Rat" a Ganymedian, boy, did we make a break! But mistakes creep into the makeup of a magazine, which go unnoticed in the rush of ready copy, checking proofs, and locking up final foundry-forms. Still, (Look, we're hedging!) because of the fact that our hero was mixed in the Ganymedian revlpt, we more or less took him for granted as a Ganymedian. But Gosh! why scream about that trifle? I, Peacock, have a lead novelette in a current magazine—and the editor apparently disliked my first name, so he used another. You had your aesthetic sense riled—I lost a chance at a certain amount of publicity in the writing game where I earn my living. Yet, I wrote no caustic, biting letter about the mistake, important as it was.

Seriously, Ganymedian or Centaurian, the mistake was slight. Either was an alien personality,

created from an author's imagination; and the substitution error did not detract from the story.

In any magazine, or story, all readers can find mistakes. But the prime purpose of reading is not to find those errors—but to look for the things that give you pleasure. If we err now and then, we apologize; editors, believe it or else, are not machines. In the reading and writing of millions of words a year, only a superman could make no mistakes, and our army status convinces us that we fail that goal by a wide margin.

So—

And now, coming to the Vizigraph. Sure, we like constructive criticism—but we also like personalities. Golly, Sanford, a letter department should not read with all of the musty dryness of a statistical report! And if all letters boiled down to two-thirds "piffle," with the other third a series of sound, interlocking thoughts about PLANET—then we should feel that our efforts are being rewarded; for, at best, the editor of a magazine takes more kicks than he does kudos.

And in our closing, may we say this: We honestly believe that st-fiction readers and writers have probably the most open minds and imaginations upon fiction, of any group of people in the world. For there are no hide-bound conventions to follow, no theories too wild for deliberate consideration, and no story but in what they can find a kernel of merit. We like 'em; we hope they like us—and we hope that you will find the time to write PLANET again, in any mood that pleases you. For, strangely enough, kicks are sometimes the things that bring kisses later.

Anyway, drop us a line at your convenience.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

## GEE, A GRINNING GENIUS?

Springboro, Pa.  
August 2, 1942.

DEAR EDITOR:

All fooling aside, did I really win one of Leydenfrost's smooth illustrates? Are you really giving those pictures away? To guys and gals like us? Well, if you still are passing them out mark this aged damsel down for: (1) Leydenfrost on p. 21; (2) Morey on p. 83 (fooled you on that, eh?), and (3) . . . I say, no need to list third preference is there? Sorry I couldn't ask for the double-spread Leydenfrost, the elongated character drifting in space was a bit too bony for my taste—almost gruesome in fact. I was indeed shocked, or amazed, or perhaps thrilled, when I realized that the Viz. readers gave me this choice. Honestly now, I wonder if it's because I am a woman and they think I'll be hurt if I do not win a prize! I thought that last letter was simply terrible, and didn't blame you for cutting it.

First thing I did Saturday evening was to read the Viz., I always turn to that first. As a thousand others, loyal PLANET fans all, have said the Viz. is PLANET'S core. As a result I chalk up the three winners in this issue as: Hidley, as thoughtful a criticism as he ever has written, Stan Haynes, concise, thought provoking, unbalanced, and, thirdly, Victor King (minus the Poison Pen title). Yes indeed, Victor, poor blind little Alyce an old lady at sixteen and no lipstick. Why Cummings, a really good writer, must rob the cradle and spill buckets of blood to ruin his yarns, I'll never know!

"Space Oasis," ideal story of the haunting Eden that all good science-fictioners dream about. I'd like an asteroid myself!

"Prison Planet," was good work. The idea back of the story sold me on it. Tucker is welcome to second place. How about a letter, Bob?

"City of Living Flame," good little tale with a touch of eerie alien menace. Man saves Earth again, but nicely done.

"Stellar Showboat," the kind of detective story we've been waiting for, but even this falls a little short of the ideal.

The first four stories are those I have named. I should have added a fifth, after all "Quest of Thig" was written by a relative of mine, by marriage and I should stick up for him. Still, ever since I read the first draft of that wild yarn I have the uneasy feeling that perhaps Thig really did land on Earth—in Pennsylvania. It's the darnedest feeling! Do you suppose. . . . Nope, I'm not going to say it. Nor am I going to rate the rest of the stories. List the four best stories is my system, and sometimes the worst, usually initialed R. C.

Leydenfrost's cover is fair. Where did the gal get the strip of shiny tin can in her hair? Leydenfrost is your best artist on covers, however, since Finlay deserted the style that made him famous in *Weird Tales*. Glad to see another Paul, a really fine one this time. Leydenfrost's illustrate for "Stellar Showboat" was excellent—would have made a *different* cover, scowls and all. Morey is improving I do believe! Almost as good as he used to be years ago!

Where's Asimov gone these last few months? Was he afraid to keep on winning originals? An Asimov with scruples under that beard? Now with me I'd like to paper a room with them, a small room anyway. Wouldn't you, Mr. Isaac Asimov, like illustrations of Milt Lesser, *The Happy Genius*, grinning down at you from the ceiling as you type, or a drawing of Larry Shaw's one and only original Hermit's Cave? Well, try and get them, Asimov! This new generation of letter writers has stolen all your thunder. You'd be lucky to get third place! Kidding shoved aside, how about Gifford sprinkling a few of his pictured impressions of letter writers along through the Viz., or some other cartoonist!

Where have all the other girls, the feminine readers, of PLANET taken themselves? Are the stories sucked dry of romance? Or are they all too busy in defense plants? It's a shame to let men dominate the Viz. when so many of us read it. As Stanley Haynes says so well, a bit of femininity, even sex appeal, is appreciated.

A last thought. Hidley favors fewer interplanetary plots and a bi-monthly publication of PLANET, to which I also subscribe. After all stories centered entirely on another planet or in another dimension are in another world, even if there are no space ships handy. Your stated policy will easily include such tales. Or, happy thought, how about a sister, or brother, magazine featuring off-trail stories? Human interest, and a dash of romance, plus mechanical gadgets!

Sincerely,

MRS. MARGARET WELLS.

## NOT ON YOUR LIFE, BOY! GET IT? ARF! ARF! ARF!

Box 204,  
Hartshorne, Okla.

DEAR EDITOR:

Greetings and salutations! What's this about me being a sissy and afraid to fight? How dare



you incinerate such a thing? I'm not scared, just bashful. Why, even as a mere child, I was shy and retiring. Except at mealtimes.

Writing letters to PLANET STORIES is like kissing a pretty girl. It doesn't take long to realize you like it. And it's hard to stop. That brings me to a statement I am determined to make. (I defy anyone to successfully deny it.) The magazine is improving. The Fall Issue is better than the Summer Issue. The Summer Issue was better than the Spring Issue. Of course, that's as it should be. But "should be" ain't "always is."

The cover is swell this time. I like Leydenfrost. I've said that before, remember? You say you like constructive criticism. Here's some. Don't put yellow on the cover. Also, the cover gal is a bit—er—flat chested. I like 'em buxom. The cover is still swell.

Best title this time: *City of the Living Flame*. Best inside art work: Leydenfrost's pic on page 2. Second: Leydenfrost on page 79. Third: Paul on page 53. Paul would have been first, except for Leydenfrost. Rate the other artists this way: Morey, Lynch, Knight. Is this the Knight who criticized Moskowitz's story, *Man of the Stars*? I've a good mind to pan his art work just to show him how it feels.

That brings me to the letter section. (Do you notice how naive I am? I keep talking about the magazine; the art work, the stories, and so on. Can't win a prize that way.) I liked Moskowitz's letter. I sympathize with him one hundred per cent. I know the blood, sweat and tears it takes to write stories. I write a little myself. (Mine are confessions.) Conover perpetrates a readable missive. To Morajo I can only say, "Utsnay!" I like Conway's wacky style—but only when he writes it. No imitations, please! Give Victor King's letter first place. Bless his heart. He can't fool me with his Poison Pen stuff. He's a nice man. Give second place to Maxwell. I agree with almost nothing he says, but I enjoyed his letter. How old is Larry Shaw? "Fantasy readers are unbalanced," says Mr. Haynes. I believe I will resent that. Does Mr. H. include himself? Mr. Washington, do you yourself know what you are talking about? This here now Hidley letter. I'm not sure I get it. Starts out without any address. Talks about stories, and stuff, away back. Says Nelson Bond is a see-saw author. Maybe we ought to tell the editor of Blue Book about that. I'll bet he doesn't know it. He's been printing some of Bond's stuff. Oh, well, give Hidley third.

Pan most authors and they fight back. Criticize Azimov and see if he doesn't jump down your throat. But we throw tons of bricks at Ray Cummings and he never says a word. I wonder why. Personally, I don't intend to do it any more.

If you will continue reading my letter (and I insist that you do) I will rate the stories. *City of the Living Flame*. The blue tube-things, the Floaters, the Dim-Ing—these otherworldly beings made the story for me. *War-Gods of the Void*. (Why *Void*?) I'm glad to see Kuttner with us. He's plenty good. The climax snuck up on me. *Quest of Thig*. Second best title in the issue. I hope the people who criticized *Queen of the Blue World* read this. It'll show 'em! *Space Oasis*. The master's touch. Did anyone ever read a bad story by Gallun? *Stellar Showboat*. Glad to see you, Mr. Jameson. Your story reminded me, very faintly, of Doc Smith's stuff. But that's no

criticism! *Vampire Queen*. At first I didn't like the tragic ending. But I realize it had to be. Makes the story stronger. *Prison Planet*. The character of Rat made this story something to remember. Bob Tucker has the imagination for STF stuff. *The Thought-Men of Mercury*. It's no disgrace, Mr. Winterbotham, to rate last in this crowd. And aren't we all glad we have thumbs?

I've got a pun worse than Hasse's ghost story. On Ganymede we had a pet Grafus named Laura. She was sixteen feet high and sixty long, and she was a strict vegetarian, except when she accidentally swallowed a poet one day. She immediately brought him back up, of course. After that we called him the poet Laura ate. Get it? Well, I can't like it much, either.

I've got a poem worse than the pun. Impossible?

But my poetry stinks!

Hoping you're the same,

JAMES RUSSELL GRAY.

## SSSH, LOOK—SCIENCE, NO LESS!

4766 Reinhart Drive,  
Oakland, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Ummm . . . the Fall Issue.

A quick squint at the cover and said cover is rated as the best in PLANET's existence. The theme is old, but Leydenfrost possesses a freshness and verve that makes it seem utterly new. The bug-wugs are alien as anything, the background barbarically intriguing, and the female sufficiently exposed to make a truly good cover.

Never let Leydenfrost go. His art has a vibrant, outre quality that tingles the imagination.

Stories? "Stellar Showboat" is my favorite. Good, swift action that's easy to read, and yet logical throughout. Jameson always was at his best in interplanetaries. More from this author.

In second place comes Ray Gallun's "Space Oasis." It may have dragged a bit, exploited a well-worn plot, but "Space Oasis" had a realistic atmosphere I liked. Gallun sorta violates the PLANET policy, though: He put some science in his story.

"Thought Men of Mercury" takes third. The conflict between the main characters was not adequately brought out, but a snappy ending gave this one precedence over:

"City of the Living Flame," by Henry Hasse. This, too, uses an old plot but still is up to standard. Hasse's standard, that is! Hey! Wotinnell's the idea in calling a twenty-four-page novelette a "novel"? Maybe Hank used concentrated wordage or sumpin.

As for the rest, they were rather mediocre in quality except, perhaps, the Tucker short. "Prison Planet," which seemed a bit muddled at first, but had an ending striking enough to lift it about the ruck.

Illustrations? Leydenfrost, in particular, is exceptional. Morey improves, but one pic an issue will be plenty. Ditto for Lynch. Damon Knight's new style is appreciated. It's coquill board, is it not? Tennyrate, let's have more by the latter.

Favorite illustration: Leydenfrost for "Stellar Showboat." Was it King who said he couldn't draw faces. (I know blasted well it was.)

The Vizigraph bumbles along as amusingly as ever. Conover confuses. Morajo baffles. After

reading her letter, I'm prompted to write that I didn't know she spoke Portuguese.

Moskowitz surprises. Along with the editor, I believed him completely obliterated; but Mosky evidently knows diff'runt. Good for him!

Still didn't like "Man of the Stars," though. Seemed a bit sloppy to me.

Argghh . . . must the letter-hacks give themselves those asinine titles? "King, of the Poisoned Pen," "The Macabre One," "The Mastermind," indeed! Exception, however, is Larry Shaw. "The one and only original hermit. Look for the big, red letters on the cave."

Haw!

J. C. Ray is wonderfully cute.

Oh, shux, the mosquitos are beginning to penetrate the force walls of my boudoir as I sit here typing. They must have tacked a "free lunch" sign on me, for, though I have directed the full force of my mighty mentality at them, they come on undisturbed.

Such being the case, I'm going to close this letter as quickly as possible by rating the letters, and making some scrambled suggestions while I still possess a certain amount of poundage.

No. 1.—Hidley the reliable—who cops a whole page in the Vizigraph. Imagine, he actually has something to say! Which, for Mr. Hidley's benefit, I might explain, is a slur at Messrs. Heiner, Conover, Conway and Maxwell all of whom should read page 128 and revise their latest drivings accordingly.

No. 2.—Raym Washington who has forsaken his evil habit of enclosing poetry.

No. 3.—Shaw. Yeah, he still ranks up there.

Wants and Suggestions: more Jameson, Bond, and Leydenfrost. Less Cummings—make that *no* Cummings—and the abolishment of Hoskins. Restrict the printing on the cover to announcement of one story and author. When do we get trimmed edges? And how about a fanmag review dept'?

Final thought: get Tucker to write some humor for PLANET. Remember how "Interstellar Way Station" went over?

Sincerely,

GEORGE EBRY.

## UP—UP—UP—UP!

142 E. 12th Street,  
Salisbury, N. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

If I were marooned on a desert island and could have but two things, I'd pick PLANET and watermelon. PLANET would satisfy my soul, and watermelon would take care of my innards. And if I could have but two authors, I'd take Asimov and Rocklyne. And if I could have but two artists, I'd take Leydenfrost and Finley. But, thank goodness, I'm not marooned and I'm not limited to watermelon and PLANET, nor to Asimov and Rocklyne, nor to Leydenfrost and Finley. I can have turnip greens and ham 'n' eggs and Possum and corn bread and chitlins and oysters and hamburgers and hot dogs (with mustard). And I can have PLANET and your competitors. And I can have Bond and Wellman and Kuttner and Cummings (hang it) and Hasse and Smith; I can have Bok and Morey and Guy Gifford and Lynch (him). In short, I can play hog and have the whole works.

I think Bill Stoy's idea about some kind of an organization is super swell. Here are my ideas on the subject. A special coupon should be published in PLANET for membership applica-

tion. A roster of the members should be published and the complete list, with addresses should be turned over to someone to keep tab on. Next, a special magazine should be published for benefit of the members, supplied to them at cost. Advertising should be used, and the profits used to pay the secretary for his trouble in handling the affairs of the club. Now as far as the contents of the magazine: Letters and articles from the members, giving their ideas on the whole science and fantasy fiction field. Gradually, this magazine would become the yardstick by which the entire field would be measured. Science fiction would be written accordingly. More and more readers would be drawn into the fold, and more and more editors would grab each issue of the club's magazine (yes, it would be supplied to editors free) as religiously as debutantes grab Winchell's column to find out where they were the night before to get such a headache. Magazine sales would go up and up and up and by and by there wouldn't be any bi-monthlies or quarterlies. There would be monthlies. And maybe even some weeklies. Isn't that a peach of a thought?

I'm running out of space and I haven't commented on the yarns and pics. Shall we say they are all good and let it go at that? Bye, now.

Sincerely,

WILKIE CONNER.

## WELL, RAYM, SPEAK UP!

213 North Waverly,  
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

Your pages have never been disgraced by a missive from I before. Think of that! Me—a Caster of Oil, a Sultan of Sarcasm, a sinner eater. Prepare yourselves, worthy punks, and do not try to pluck the threads from the hem of my robe—it might unravel and leave me in my shorts.

Needless to say, I have read the letters in the Fall issue of PS and am now sick.

I was down on Q level—where quod people stand around in bread queus—supervising a crap game when the little speaker horns squeaked: "Send Pongley to the Hanging Level at once."

Leaving the quod people dully shooting their craps, I rode up. I alighted at the Hanging Level. Several people were hanging around in listless attitudes. They seemed out of this world. "What the hemp—?" I wondered.

A monsker came tottering over to me. "Quick!" it shrieked, "PLANET is out—there aren't many left on the stands." Like a hot rocket I dashed across the tarmac and took off. I didn't wait for my plane. That was a mistake. Anyway, I made my way to the nearest newsstand.

There was one copy left. It was nailed to the boards. I gave the man 20¢. He gave me a hammer and I pried out the nail. I sat right down and read the first story I opened to. It was *Prison Planet*, by Bob Tucker.

When I got up I silently handed the magazine back to the dealers and held out an empty hand. He wordlessly gave me back my money. As I was leaving, I saw him nailing the copy to the boards again, setting the trap for the next sucker.

No one has any idea what I'm talking about, which makes everyone happy, eh Raym?

Sincerely,

H. P. PONGLEY.

## REBIRTH OF THE LAST MARTIAN?

1019 Kishwaukee St.,  
Rockford, Ill.

DEAR EDITOR:

At last! A truly great story . . . *City of the Living Flame*, by H. Hasse. No hard choice to make this time for first spot. More! Mr. Hasse. Basil Wells turned out a fine short . . . *Quest of Thig* . . . something refreshingly different. I rate *Prison Planet* next. Bob Tucker had a really amusing twist to his tale. (4) *The Thought Men of Mercury* . . . Good. (5) *Space Oasis*, by Raymond Z. Gallun . . . Mediocre. (6) *Vampire Queen*, by Thornton Ayre . . . I find it a bit trite, with a time-worn plot. (7) *War Gods of the Void*, by Henry Kuttner. Very disappointing, usually like his stories . . . This one just didn't click. (8) *Stellar Showboat*, by Malcolm Jameson . . . *Phew!* My first letter to *Vizigraph* not printed! So I cast my ballots for: Conway, Shaw, and Lesser. Where is Guy Gifford's cartoon? Very interesting, so say I. Best illustration by Knight, page 69. Sheer genius . . . simplicity that's it. Give Paul and Morey credit for fine pics. The rest were gosh-awful. What about Van Houten? Most promising author in *PLANET*, as yet, please beg, borrow, or steal his work. *The Last Martian* needs a sequel. . . .

Sincerely,

ROBERT G. ANDERSON,  
*The Mental Ultimate.*

## A BUDDING WRITER WRITES

4217 W. Fullerton Ave.,  
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Editor:

This is the first fan letter I have ever written in my life. Honest!! But this *Vizigraph* department gets me. It's the first letter-department I've ever read that sounded as if it were written by people.

And first of all, I want to offer Sam Moskowitz my hand (size 8½). Pardon me while I take off my glove. I want to be real polite to that man. He hits the bull's eye in that letter. He took care of one of my private peeves for me. That, *snap, snap*, for you who gap at a gnat and swallow a Dim-Ing. It takes imagination plus a lot of hard work and study to be able to write those yarns. I suggest that, if some people haven't got the necessary I.Q. plus a healthy imagination to read them, they get themselves a copy of True Love and have themselves a nice cozy evening.

That's not saying that I like all the S.F. yarns that are printed. The ones that irk me are the old standbys that are brought out and dusted off and polished up with a new space-ship and a few ray guns. I skip them and only come back to them when I can't find another cock-eyed word to read anywhere else.

Want a bouquet, Ed? I find very few of that kind of stories in P.S. I do have a kick about the cover on this fall issue, though. The slaves in "War-Gods of the Void" were supposed to wear red, so this gal comes out in what looks like a green nightshirt. And doesn't Leydenfrost know that girls don't wear marcel's any more? Also, someone yells, "Shoot 'em in the eyes, it's their only vulnerable spot." So she shoots 'em through the top of the head, helmet and all. I got a laugh out of that!

It's hard to rate the yarns. "War Gods of the Void," first, I think. "The Thought-Men of

Mercury" second; and "Quest of Thig" and "Vampire Queen" tying for third.

"Stellar Showboat" ought to be in there somewhere, but I've already slipped in an extra as it is.

Has anyone got any '39, '40 and '41 issues of *PLANET STORIES* to sell? Let me at them. I want them for serious study. I'm going to write Stf. It'll be a long time before I'm good enough for P.S. but maybe if my family sees my name in the line-up of one of those mags, they'll stop looking at me as if they were measuring me for a straightjacket. I pity them. They don't know good reading when it's right under their noses.

(Afterthought.) What's the matter with Conway? Has he got St. Vitus Dance? Poor fellow!

Sincerely,

RUTH WASHBURN.

## YEP, THAT'S PEACOCK

Raleigh Road,  
Wilson, N. C.

Dear Editor:

Dully I enter the newsstand. Slowly my head turns from side to side, studying the rows upon countless rows of pulp magazines, looking for new issues of science-fiction mags. My eyes light up; my hands reach forth. I pluck *PLANET* from the shelves.

Something about the lettering on the cover strikes my eye. It seems unusual. I scan the names: Kuttner, Tucker, Hasse, Ayre, Winterbotham.

For an instant, hope flashes through my mind.

"No, it couldn't be!" I mutter.

Nervously, my fingers groping, I turn to the contents page. Eagerly I read it, reread it, scarcely believing my eyes. It's true!

Clutching the mag, I rush from the newsstand and down the street, crying out the glad tidings. Children scream! Women faint! Men gasp in amazement! Hysterically, I rush down the streets crying, "No Cummings in *PLANET*! No Cummings in *PLANET* this issue!"

Finally calming down, I manage to look over this issue of *PLANET*. Without Cummings, it should be the best issue since "Vassals of the Master-World." Looking at the contents, I'm positive of it. Reading the stories, I know it.

First, of course, was Hasse's "City of the Living Flame." How about a sequel? Surely a little puny little cave-in isn't going to kill the Dim-Ing.

Second is Kuttner's novelette. A little too much formula, but good.

"Quest of Thig" is third and good. But definitely. The other two shorts tie for fourth. The remaining three novelettes come in this order: "Vampire Queen," "Space Oasis," and "Stellar Showboat."

The only one I didn't enjoy was "Stellar Showboat." Malcolm Jameson is usually good, but no more dressed-up detective stories.

Somehow, Leydenfrost rubs me the wrong way. His covers are fairly good, but I don't like his interiors. This will probably bring the wrath of all the readers down on my head, as all the other letters praise him up and down.

Best is Morey's for Hasse, next is Lynch's for Winterbotham, third is Leydenfrost's for Kuttner. The only reason he got there was by the grace of good luck and the law of gravity. I thought a long time before putting him over Damon Knight.

Hoskins is improving. More of Damon Knight. Where is Gifford's cartoon series?

There couldn't be any connection between W. Scott Peacock and Wilbur S. Peacock, could there?

As to the letters. First is the Macabre Maxwell (Benny's?). Second is the Genius (Cretin?) Lesser. Third is the (nothing as yet) Conover. Lesser could do with less listening to Bob Hope.

As to Gray and King, here is more about Cummings. He loves the word "leprous." He uses it in almost every story at least once. I quote from two of his stories; one new, one reprint.

"Suddenly a ghastly, leprous vision, part of the bird and the girl's white-limbed body abruptly were melting. Ghastly, fused, leprous thing, bird and body. . . ."

"A leprous wreck of a door, hanging there banging with a thump and rattle."

And so on, ad infinitum.

Sincerely,

BANKS MEBANE.

## NO MONTHLY MAG FOR CARTER!

156 S. University St.,  
Blackfoot, Idaho.

Dear Editor:

So Raym asks, "Does anybody know what I'm talking about," see? Deep dark mystery, see? But the secret's out, now. The gentleman is referring to a story he desires reprinted, a story entitled "Ark of Fire"—which desire has given our Floridan fan the slightly doubtful distinction of being called "No. 1 Ark of Fire Bug."

Seriously, though, he's got something there, I'd put in a vote for that tale myself.

Second place in the Vizigraph goes to Moskowitz's rebuttal of the Damon Knight knocks.

As for the other letters, we might as well pin a medal on "old-guardian," Hidley, in view of long and meritorious service. There, now, let's leave the Vizigraph before the ax falls (whew!).

Lynch snaps out of the usual coma to take first place in the illustrating bracket. Paul next, followed by Leydenfrost, who has slipped a little. (His first picture about 109% better than the second.) I refuse to make loud noises about voting for certain people's letters for the benefit of this crushed ego. To quote from W. Kermit Conway, III: "Yeah!"

Oh, yes; there was a cover this time, wasn't there? Not as good as Leydenfrost's debut, but a great improvement over the "monster and line of chorus girls" of last issue. I am especially taken with the face on the stone jug at the *Thing's* left. Come on, Raym, give us an "Ode to a Venutian Urn," what say?

Let's see, now . . . was there something else? Feature Flash—no, that wasn't it. Omission of Gifford's cartoon? No, although you deserve to have your office blown up for it. There was something else, though—

Why, of course! This is primarily a *fiction* magazine, isn't it? There were a few stories . . .

Adjectives usually sound slightly cheap when applied to a tale like "City of the Living Flame." Asimov could probably think of several, as it has no love interest in it, and the Big Bad Boy from Brooklyn, as everybody knows by now, is a direct, lineal descendant of Gilles de Retz (the original, actual, non-mythological Bluebeard). And a certain society which has just been formed, the SFTEABOBVISTEM, better known as

the "Society for the Exaltation and Boosting of Big Bad Villains in Sci-Fi-Fiction Magazines," has a set of adjectives of a different sort—adjectives cursing Henry Hasse for creating the best villain of this particular type since Binder's immortal "Spawn of Eternal Thought," and then killing the creature without a qualm. The Friends of Mars (inquire M. W. Wellman) will be shrieking with joy at the characterization of Kaarji and Bhruulo; for, although everybody knows that Martians are physically the unhuman "petal pussies" of Wellman, it is also a fact that their character is better described in Hasse's words. But your correspondent can only rack his brain futilely, search a thesaurus just as futilely, and finally cough up the stale, old, worn, hackneyed word: "Classic."

"War-Gods of the Void"—which, by the way, is far different than what the title would suggest—comes in second. Boy, what a way to destroy a villain! Mr. Kuttner, you don't happen to have two large containers of the Swamja-virus, do you? They'd be very handy for planting on Berchtesgaden (or Smolensk or Wilhelmstrasse, if the occupant is about) and certain headquarters in Tokyo, wouldn't they?

Jameson's "Stellar Showboat" comes in third with a most ingenious criminal method.

Tucker's first venture into non-humorous fiction keeps up the high standard this new author has set for himself.

Winterbotham drags down fifth place. Further than fifth, I absolutely refuse to go.

But, kiddies—please note that this issue of PLANET is Volume 1, No. 12. Twelve issues have been completed. It is therefore time to dish out that delightful whimsy, the Annual Report of "our" mag's progress. So here goes—and, mind you, gang, I have hired Lt. Peter van Buskirk and a company of Valerians, just in case you desire to alter my opinion and/or profile . . .

No. 1. "Vassals of the Master World." True, it has been knocked about considerably, but after long deliberation here it is. A *tremendous* epic in its scope and method of writing. And I am not going to ask for a sequel; that would spoil it.

2. And, lol a very, very rare event has taken place. The first story of a new author—and, to make it better, a short story—gets second place! "The Last Martian," by Raymond Van Houten, is another of these tales that one endorses "classic" after reading one paragraph.

3. Next comes that sterling trio, "The Forbidden Dream," "Exiles of the Desert Star," and "Task to Lahri," all by Ross Rocklyne. But next time let's have a full-length novel and have Hallmeyer *do* something about his boss. Otherwise, he'll be killing off alien races the rest of his life. What a future! Come on, Ross, let's not be so hard on Hallmeyer. . . .

4. "Shadrach," by Nelson S. Bond. The sympathetic treatment of the old pioneer, "Salvation" Smith, is a welcome change—think what L. Sprague de Camp would have done with this story (much as I like de Camp)! The school to which de Camp belongs has made one little error; in tearing down the forces of "bigotry," they have become as narrow-minded as their much-hated opponents ever were. Bond, it would seem, has kept his head.

5. "Twilight of the Tenth World," by Thornton Ayre. Probably this would have rated higher, but Ayre's mishandling of slang detracted just a little. Next time, Thornton, why not try this: lay your next story in your native Lancashire, and create British villain, hero, and heroine.

6. Odd combination! A tie between the two stories you have published by Sam Moskowitz—"World of Mockery" and "Man of the Stars." No wonder; look at the standard he sets other authors! You can just about count the stories he lists "classic," since 1937, on one hand.

7. A dark horse: "The Star-Mouse," by Fredric Brown. You publish unusual short stories, Mr. Editor. Very unusual! And, by the way, don't you guys like humor? This tale stands out like a nudist in a crowd of Eskimos among the welter of blood, confusion, blood, women, blood, Cummings plot and setting, blood, careening spaceships, blood, exploding universes, blood, whole civilizations going down the drainpipe, blood, etc., blood . . . well, you get the idea.

8. "Vampire of the Void," by Neil R. Jones. Nuff sed.

9. "As It Was," by Carlton Smith. What a swell propaganda story! And the satire was worthy of Coblenz at his fun-poking best. Did I say something about good short stories, dear ed?

10. "City of the Living Flame," by Henry Hasse. See above.

Repp's "Buccaneer of the Star Seas" is not quite good enough to make the hit parade, but an honorable mention is indicated.

Notice, Mr. Editor, that no stories from the first two issues made the grade. Notice also, that the third issue and all following (counting "Buccaneer") have at least one smash hit in their pages. That's not only a good sign; it shows also that there has not been a let-down after the first surge of good fiction. Your next volume should show even more improvement. But leave the magazine a quarterly; your beautiful balance would go haywire with mass production.

As for artwork; you were held back for several issues by Drake, but that awful thing he did on the cover of Spring, 1941 P.S. must have cured you; the only slip after that was Saunders' line of chorus girls of Summer '42. A bouquet for introducing Leydenfrost to the S.F. world.

The introduction of Morey in issue number 2, Paul in No. 3, Bok in No. 5, and Leydenfrost in No. 10, all appreciated. In the realm of "starting-from-scratch" talent you haven't had so much luck; Lynch, splendid at times, absolutely stinks on some occasions. Suggestions: Finlay, Wesso, Schneeman (watch him, though, he's almost as temperamental as Lynch), Schomburg, Dolgov. Watch those inside illustrations; they're your weakest point.

Authors: Please, let's not pass off any more Cummings' hack. Either insist on his best work or don't accept him. Read his "Rain of Fire" in a competitor; see, he can vary—not even a heroine! Read his reprinted classics in other competitors. And let's not have his three standard plots (robots vs. man, with inevitable developments; mutiny in space; and, man goes into atom or to another planet or to fourth dimension or to macrocosm and rescues a beautiful girl, who is either alien glamor girl or else not over 16, from a black-browed villain of a certain type, with climax consisting of a battle between villain's forces and a band of winged girls with some blood thrown in). Develop Hasse; he's good. And how about breaking the old taboo just long enough for Warner van Lorne to come out of hiding and pen another "Strange City" or "World of Purple Light." And—(further words drowned out by chorus of boos and hisses from fans.

Sincerely,

PAUL CARTER.

## LOOK, A CUMMINGS' FAN!

Shore Drive Hotel,  
Ocean View, Virginia.

DEAR EDITOR:

I would—I *could*—write a long letter. But I feel sorry for you. A person's eyesight is a precious thing, and I regret not having a typewriter even more than you do—honest! So be patient—the end will soon come, and you can rest your weary head on someone's beautifully typed letter.

In the interim, I hasten to tell all that I can about what I think of "Planet Stories." No, I never wrote before—but please forgive me. I thought everyone else was doing so nicely. And anyhow, I'm writing now.

My favorite authors are: Cummings, Kuttner, Ayre, Bond, Binder, Wellman, Reynolds, Rocklynne, Wylie, and Winterbotham. Naturally, they are not the only ones—and they are not always sure-fire (not all of them) but they hit the mark oftener than most of your writers; at least, with me. I happen to like Bond, Binder and Cummings the very best, and Cummings sort of shades even those two masters. Some folks crab that he is hack, etc., etc. Well, all I can say is, his atom stories are something to dream about—and to think about! And his stories generally go into more romantic detail as to method, result, and so on. I see his point—I thrill at the emotions he knows how to play upon. Go on, you scoffers—read a Cummings', and let yourself go! Sympathizing with the hero—pretend it's all so. If you don't do that, why do you read S-F. anyway, or for that matter, anything? I know one thing—if you go into a thing with a sneer on your lip, looking for flaws, you'll find them. And you're just hurting yourself, for the capacity to live the story is not yours, and the whole meaning and enjoyment of "reading" is unknown to your meager soul. I pity you.

The artists, Finlay and Bok, Morey, Leydenfrost and Knight I like very well. I do not like Lynch so well. I might add that Finlay is out of this world, and the best there is. A close second is Magarian, but Finlay is still tops. I like Paul's machines, but not his humans. He's perfect in his own field. Bok is eerie, but close to accurate in picturing "things" unknown to the human mind. Keep him on. He fills a definite need.

Now, the Vizigraph. Yes, yes, I like it. But there is a fault (didn't you know I'd find one?) It's the way you don't say enough—just a crack above each letter. The whole thing rather misses fire, for me. The very definite questions sometimes asked are never answered. It rather leaves one hanging, you know. I hope you decide on answering questions here and there. Not silly ones, but questions of perhaps general interest, now and then, as they are asked. I like very much the impromptu letters by the authors. It gives me a feeling of one-ness with the behind-the-scenes part of your magazine. I feel they are my friends. Don't ever give that up, will you not?

Now, I'm to vote, am I not? That's not easy. I like the wise-cracks, the ham, all of it—it's fun. But I have to be different. I should vote for Morajo, because I'm from Los Angeles, and terribly homesick, too. But Morajo's letter was something we all couldn't fairly vote for, because the language was quite beyond my intelligence, here and there. Only someone who understood could truly prefer that letter. Conover was good, because he made me laugh. Conway III made me chuckle. Gray—Shaw—Lesser—Washington, Jr.—all showed imagination and sparkle.



The rebuttal of Moscovitz was fine and certainly expressed my own views (very politely) on the ones who pick stories to pieces. But my number one vote goes to friend J. C. Ray. Why? Because his idea was intelligent and pregnant with possibilities. Too bad we are not yet far enough in the future to try it. It seems to me a large stride toward the world of tomorrow—the recognition of genius—the value of science to the race, as it has never been evaluated before.

The idea was too futuristic, but it was a dreamer's idea, and dreamers often set the pace for the doers. Only too often, it takes a long time to do anything. Man is too slow and stupid to leap ahead—he must climb and struggle and suffer to get there.

Oh, your cover. I should say that the Fall Issue had a fine cover—but the girl, somehow, wasn't so good. Without her, or, with her in the background, the picture would have had power, line, and color. I deeply regret, however, that such a good picture is ruined by print. We have the list inside—we don't need it on the front to ruin a cliff or a background of sea or sky. In fact, I think the title, and the picture, unblemished, is even more tasty to the eye. I wonder who agrees with me?

So the short letter wasn't too short after all. I'm sorry. I do hope you won't need glasses, or aspirins. At least, not on my account.

I hope!

But to prove I mean well, I'll go take my bath. The tub ran over, and the water sloshes about my ankles rather sadly as I write. Guess I got too interested in my letter!

On second thought, I'd better hurry. The people downstairs are using the most awful language. Good thing you can't hear it, folks. The weather's warm enough as it is.

So good bye, for now, and luck to P. S. I wish you printed six more sf-mags. I run out of reading so soon!

Sincerely,

GWEN CUNNINGHAM.

## A CRYING TOWEL FOR THE SPACE FALCON, PLEASE!

616 E. McCarty Ave.,  
Jefferson City, Mo.

Dear Editor:

Sniff! Sob! Gasp! Boo! Hoo! Hooooo! (Et Cetera).

Gee Whiz!

You don't know what it's like to (sob) pick up the newest copy of PLANET off the newsstand, and (sob) find that the mean old editor hadn't (sniff) printed your first and only letter to his old magazine. And (sniff—sob) you had such high hopes of winning a Paul or Leydenfrost (sob) or something with that wonderful letter.

Huh?

Oh, what if my letter was about two weeks later than it should have been? Couldn't that \$%!\*%#@! editor have held up publication? Isn't PLANET published exclusively for me? Aren't all s-f mags? They aren't?! Ahhhhh. Disappointment runs rampant in my brain (?).

Oh, well! Grasping myself up by the bootstraps, I prepare my second letter to dear old PLANET . . . and the dear old Vizigraph.

Leydenfrost's cover was very, very good. At least 100% better than THAT THING by Saunders you wished on us in the Summer ish. Ledly still lacks the smoothness and finish of the Master Finlay, but personally I prefer his interior work to Virgil's any day.

Paul's work was wonderful as usual, but he doesn't show up, without a two-page spread, to the best advantage.

Both of Morey's efforts were only fair. Lynch was good this time, for a change. Knight and Hoskins were only fair.

What?

Oh, you want my ratings on the stories, do you? Well, prepare for the worst. Ratings based on 10 to 1, 10 being high.

1. *War-Gods of The Void* (9.5) Very good! I hear Kuttner is going into the army. Can it be that. . . Oh no! Please! Don't lose this great author!

2. *City of The Living Flame* (9.2). This new guy, Hasse, is really good.

3. *Prison Planet* (8). Imagine! Two new authors, like Hasse and Tucker, rating up in the top three. For a long time now, Bob has been considered the nation's No. 1 fan. But the lad can write! Yoicks! Now who is up for nomination. I hereby suggest Victor King, top letter-writer of the bunch, be appointed in Tucker's place, if Bob continues as a pro.

4. *Quest of Thig* (7). Though not exactly new, Wells made a fine story out of it.

5. *Stellar Showboat* (6.5). Although I don't care too much for Jameson, this was much better than some of his tries.

6. *Space Oasis* (5).

*Vampire Queen* (5).

*Thought-men of Mercury* (5). Strange, is it not, three such usually good authors coming out with such poor stories? Too bad.

POEM—

Oh, the letters that appear in PLANET, Tra la, Are better than stories by Cummings, Bah! Fah! Your new lettering is good, but I would have suggested the type of letters you use on PLANET COMICS as more suitable.

And for Pete's sake, do something about all those titles on the cover! Whatdyethink the cover painting is, a background for the table of contents? One editor has already taken one of my suggestions about doing something with the lettering on the front, and I hope other mags will wake up, too.

Oh yes, the three best letters this time. Let's see now!—(Thought waves waving)—Let's give first place to Sammy Moskowitz for pinning Damn (oops pardon me, Damon) Knight down. King is next, with Hidley trailing. I enjoy Conway III's letters, but let us pray that only Conway III uses this style. Oh yeh, thanks for the info, Miss Mororojo. I am sure that all fans appreciated these facts about fandom's most mysterious member.

By the way, since all fans in this space-dizzy column are adopting eerie or high-sounding monikers, Hunter shall not be left out in the cold. Donning my ragged black cloak and moth-eaten mask, and with a timid and subdued laugh, I hereby become The Space Falcon! Eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, and again eh!

Sincerely,

GENE HUNTER,  
*The Space Falcon.*



## THOSE DOGGONE PLANETS AGAIN! GOOD OLD BLACK SHEEP!

178 Pointview Rd.,  
Brentwood, Pitts, Pa.

140-92 Burden Crescent  
Jamaica, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

I was very surprised that you published my letter, in fact, I nearly fell over. But I was very happy and proud about it, too. You may know that I had to wear my iron head band to keep my head from swelling.

I was afraid to do anything about the letter, though. I'm very cautious some times. I wanted to see what comments the other readers would make on it, if any. Now, thanks to Larry Shaw (The Hermit) I have my courage back again. He voted my letter first place. Don't be surprised if I write a little rashly.

No, Mr. Gray, I'm not kidding about missing those planets that were on the cover. They made the mag stand out among all the others on the stand. They are what first impelled me to pick up the mag and examine it. Else, I would have missed all those wonderful stories and letters. Horrible thought, isn't it? Oh! Editor, I just had another horrible thought. What about all those people who may be passing up PLANET STORIES this very minute, just like I almost did. Or don't you believe in coincidences?

Well, nuff said, I hope you see my point; so now in with the stories.

I liked "City of the Living Flame" the best. I'm just cr-a-zy about those dead-city type of stories. More of the same, please.

"War-Gods of the Voids" would have come first if it weren't for "City of the Living Flame."

"Quest of Thig" and "The Thought-Men of Mercury" were both so good, I couldn't make up my mind which I liked the better.

"Space Oasis," good. Hero saves asteroid instead of world or universe, for a change.

"Prison Planet" was pretty good, but it could have been better. I don't care for Tucker's style of writing, not descriptive enough. He doesn't form good pictures of his characters for the reader to visualize.

"Vampire Queen." If Valcine Drew had not died in the end, I would have given this story more credit. Her death made the story fall flat. And what a title! Couldn't something better be thought of? It sounds so theatrical. Amaturish.

"Stellar Showboat," fiddle dee dee, I don't buy PLANET STORIES to read detective stories in it. Keep detective stories out! I can buy a detective magazine for a dime and get better stories in it than "Stellar Showboat" to read.

I take it all back what I said about Leydenfrost being no good on the covers. Some heroine! And some hero! The Swamjas are pop-eyed enough for satisfaction. More of Leydenfrost for the interior, too. Morey's slipping fast.

Now to the Vizigraph. Hmmm. A letter from Morojo . . . seems slightly off the beam. Hmmm. So Lesser has turned gold-fish gulper. I do my part, Mr. Shaw, but all I've gotten so far are suspicious looks. Guess I look fishy. I like Lesser's letter, Shaw's and Conover's. (Conover tries so hard.)

Keep up the good work, fans! We want PLANET STORIES to be the best mag on the market, don't we? It's rising nearer the top every issue, so come on!

You, too, Editor. How about a novel once in a while?

Very sincerely,

BERTHA R. GOEMPEL.

DEAR EDITOR:

Having strayed from the Vizigraph for an issue, I now return to the happy fold with some degree of pleasure. When I compiled five straight misses in Planet, I began to feel that I was traversing the well known furrow (or, colloquially, in a rut), and that I was deserving of the title, Master of Redundancy. So I took an issue's vacation (a relief for you, me, and the readers). But Le Vizi has a certain appeal I can't resist . . . it's the only s-f letter dept' where everyone really lets his hair down and is his usual infantile self . . . and so I'm back.

As for the cover, the drawing is good, but it isn't a good drawing. By which, I mean that Leydenfrost is an excellent artist and I admire his technique, but the illustration, or rather the topic thereof, isn't very good. In fact, it's quite repulsive. How I'd like to see a change in cover policy; that makes the twelfth straight cover of the same type. One with a hunk of machinery, or a scene of outer space, or even a rocket ship would not be amiss. This sort of stuff was overdone in the early years of s-f, but recently the number of covers with just humans and mebbe an occasional geegaw like a rocket gun or helmet has been too great. Far out of proportion. So, one cover of the above type should be different and rather attractive. And who can do that sort of thing better than Paul, who now seems to be doing his best work?

At a recent QSFL meeting, new artist, Musacchia, made the point that, though many fans tell why they like or dislike stories, not many do the same for the pix. Think that's partly valid, though illustrations are not nearly as important as the tales, and so will partly attempt to remedy. Don't usually like Morey because of his sloppy work and lack of detail. But this time he overcame these faults enough to turn out a decent pic. Leydenfrost is superb because he achieves wonderful effects and accurateness. Hoskins and Knight are good, probably because I like to see an occasional rocket and they aren't too hard to draw. Knight's shading is also good.

Eventually I'll have to get around to the fiction, so why not now? There were no outstanding tales, but several fairly good ones, and only one or two poor stories. Which isn't a bad average. Think I'll give Gallun's "Space Oasis" first place, though it shades the novel, "City of the Living Flame," only by a hair. Neither of these yarns has what could be called a new or different plot, but their handling treatment is better than many another scribe has done. Quite a few authors seem to enjoy butchering a tale by the injection of hack.

"Quest of Thig," by Wells, is right behind these two for a close third. It would undoubtedly be higher in position, were it not for the fact that I seem to have read something of the sort some time ago. And methinks that the goo about Thig's transformation could have been slapped on a little less thickly. Particularly towards the end.

"Vampire Queen" and "Stellar Showboat" aren't bad, and "The Thought Men of Mercury" is fair in a decrepit sort of way. Come to think of it, the ones by Jameson and Ayre are even better than that . . . which of course gives you a very accurate picture of what I think of em. A little better than not bad.

Oh, Shades of a Crumby Crumb-bun! Since there are only two yarns left on the list, you can guess I'm referring to "War-Gods of the Void" and "Prison Planet." Particularly the former. Pardon while I imitate the cry of the mating Hack-Bird, "Crummy, crummy, crummy!" Need I go into detail?

I note with pleasure my arrival in show-places in the futurity races. Though I see no mention of the fact, I hope we still get free illustrations from the issue we reviewed—and are still allowed to vote. My choices from the Spring issue are: (1) one of the large Lynchies (or a couple of small ones) from "The Star Mouse"; (2) the Paul; (3) the Leydenfrost. I'm h'eagerly h'anticipatin'!

Le Vizi about as good as ever . . . must have been due to my absence. Usually it's even better, but I drag it down to this level. Ergo, it must be having a slight slump!

Hmm, I don't get it.

A close race again in the matter of best letters. Conover, Hidley (the fact that we're fellow QSF-Lites has nothing to do with it. No?), and King. I sincerely regret not being able to squeeze Shaw in.

Somewhat pleased to see the concerted, if accidental, anti-Cummings-the-way-he-is-now drive, might feel sorry for the poor guy if he didn't deserve it. As for Lesser, the Unhappy Moron, his latest is a masterpiece of degradation and banality—a blot on the escutcheon of us pro letter writers (smudged though it may already be).

Sincerely,

BILL STOV.

## A "BIT" FROM THE TROJAN HORSE!

413 First Street,  
Troy, New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

Referring to Raym's letter, I quote: "Anybody got any idea what I'm talking about?"

Well, Raymy, oldboy, I have! It's this way:

He starts off by saying that he "was down on K level supervising a construction job, when the big speaker horns bellowed forth: 'send Raym to the hangar level at once!'"

Well, now, that obviously means that he was down in the cellar, constructing the latest issue of his fanzine, when his kid brother opens his big fat mouth and says: "come over to the garage right away."

The "plodding robots" are anybody he has helping him print the mag.

The mad genius on "A" level, who cooks up hellish schemes, is his kid brother (this may sound a little extreme to people who haven't got kid brothers, but I know; I've got one.)

The shining corridor is the reflection of the bottles of Xeeno.

He shot up the stair and into the garage, and stalked over to the "flight commander," otherwise known as his kid brother.

The awful heat that smote him in waves was natural as Florida is the southern-most part of the U. S. A.

The white-jumpered mechanics are a large collection of his kid brother's friends, the blood-red bombers are bikes. And the brats are sprinting toward the cellar which is the same as a bar.

His brother tells him that the latest issue of PLANET is out; he jumps to his bike and rides away.

The smoky road lies before him.

The heat-blasted landscape and fire-blackened

inland are because of the heat and the Florida Ship Canal which has turned southern Florida into a desert (for further details see your Sunday supplement!).

Ignoring the traffic cop he rides over to the magazine store and gets PLANET.

The flying effect is because he's riding so fast.

The three best letters were in this order:

1. Washington
2. Shaw
3. Lesser

I will gladly run over Mr. Shaw any old time, for I, too, am a hermit. There's a guy near me who used to read S.F., but since he graduated with high honors he doesn't speak to illiterate small-fry such as myself, anymore, so I don't know if he reads it anymore.

The stories rank this way:

1. *Stellar Showboat.*
2. *City of the Living Flame.*
3. *Space Oasis.*
4. *War-Gods of the Void.*
5. *Prison Planet.*

A Tie for sixth place;

*Vampire Queen*  
*Quest of Thig.*

*The Thought-Men of Mercury.*

Morey uses a very much better style in his illustrations for other mags.

I disagree that the three best mags are quarterlies. A monthly comes first, then the quarterlies.

Leydenfrost for "Stellar Showboat" terrible. If I win and you've given out everything but that, don't send it to me, send it to Hasse. It won't be any sacrifice on my part.

Sincerely,

JOHN GAVIN,  
(The Trojan Horse)

## A CUMMINGS' GAME NO LESS!

29 Maverick Square  
East Boston, Mass.

DEAR EDITOR:

Have read your mag. since it first started. Have also read every other stf. mag. since 1930. Don't believe those birds that tell you your mag. is the best on the market, they're only trying to get first place in THE VIZIGRAPH. I'd rate your whole mag about fourth, in the stf. field, which isn't too bad considering the numerous mags printed. I will admit though, that THE VIZIGRAPH is one of the best departments on the market—something about the quality of the letters in it.

Note to Stanley Haynes and others. From Stan's remark about the good (??) quality of Cummings' stories, I'd guess he is either ten years old, or a newcomer to science-fiction. Lately, two other friends and I, have played what we call the "Cummings' game." Whenever a "Cummings'" story appears in a magazine, I and my two friends read the first page, and then sit down and write what we think is the rest of the story.

The object of the game, naturally, is to see who can come closest to the actual story. So far, each contest has ended in a four-way tie. Yes! I said *four!* I, my two friends, and Cummings, all ended up with identical stories. There is more truth than poetry in Victor King's statement of Cummings' mimeographing stories.

Sciencereally yours,

ALBERT F. LOPEZ,  
World Dictator (To Be).

## LESSER SERIOUS? ULP!

2302 Ave. O,  
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

BENEATH THIS SAND,  
BELOW THE LAND,  
LIES A MAN OF YORE.  
HE'S DEAD  
BECAUSE HE LOST HIS HEAD,  
THIS POOR EDITOR.

—Epitaph For an Editor by Milt Lesser.

Why the above orgy of inevitability? Why did this letter come so late? And what, alas, is happening to PLANET STORIES? The answers to those questions and many others, this *Happy Genius* will try to bring out before you.

Take it away, Genius. . . .

About the tardiness of this Viziflash. Well, simple enough. I was on vacation somewhere out in the wilderness of New York State, and couldn't get to a typewriter for two weeks. And my handwriting was definitely out. What a mess that would be.

And what IS happening to PLANET? I think I know. And I'll explain, as others have tried. I hope the remedy is within your power; because (and this is the first time I've said that) P. S. is slowly slipping . . . beware . . . remember the epitaph!

Why is it slipping? Some letters have hinted on it all along. And I'll be a bit bolder, and come out into the open. Most of your stories have gradually evolved into CHEAP-GRADE ADVENTURE HACK. The magnitude of the stories has dwindled down to cop and robber space stuff. Great Solar Criminal, Solar Pirate, Solar Dictator, etc. No more, in the last few issues, have we been fed on stories with the scope and power, and greatness of *Vassals of the Master World*, the *Ultimate Salient*, *Twilight of the Tenth World*, *One Thousand Miles Below*, or countless others. No more could we thrill to the great vastness of such classic tales, because something horrible has happened. PLANET, horror of horrors, has dwindled down to cheap adventure. . . . No more has the strength and foresight of some stories gripped us with some unexplainable urge that is kin to all s-f fans . . . for the stories are no longer science-fiction.

Gone are the days of powerful PLANET novels that made the skin grow cold, and breath come short due to their billion-degree scope. . . .

Gone is the glory that was PLANET'S. . . .

Put up to a vote, Mr. Editor, and see what the fans think. I better stop fillubustering before I run away with myself.

But I mean every word I have said.

I would not lie about a thing like that.

In my last several letters, I went on rating and praising and not mentioning any of this. But that was only in hope. PLANET had been so good, formerly, that a small slump of a few issues couldn't bring me to say a thing like this. But, finally, well . . . I knew it was going on for good, unless something was done. So, I'm trying to "dood it!"

The only yarn of the last three issues that can stand up even feebly against those of your past is Hasse's short novel, *City of Living Flame*. But then again, naturally, Hasse is Hasse! Even editorial requirements could not stop him.

Before I go on with the rest of my letter, I'd like to remind you of the difference between this note and last issue's. I must be serious now, for something must be done.

But, above all the din of the slump, something momentous has occurred, something that must not go unnoticed. It has been three long years since PLANET had first taken the plunge into maghood. And, as a whole, they have been wonderful years. The stories, plenty of them, have the fans think. I better stop fillubustering stood out as classics of present-day science-fiction. Below is a hit parade of the twelve top stories, the dozen tales that have stood out as the best in their respective issues. Hats off to the authors!

Vol. 1, No. 1, *Cave-Dwellers of Saturn*, by Linton Davies.

Vol. 1, No. 2, *Revolt On the Earth-Star*, by Carl Selwyn.

Vol. 1, No. 3, *The Cosmic Juggernaut*, by John Russell Fearn.

Vol. 1, No. 4, *The Ultimate Salient*, by Nelson S. Bond.

Vol. 1, No. 5, *One-Thousand Miles Below*, by Eando Binder.

Vol. 1, No. 6, *Exiles of the Desert Star*, by Ross Rocklynne.

Vol. 1, No. 7, *Proktofs of Neptune*, by Henry Hasse.

Vol. 1, No. 8, *Vassals of the Master-World*, by Eando Binder.

Vol. 1, No. 9, *Man of the Stars*, by Sam Moskowitz.

Vol. 1, No. 10, *Child of the Sun*, by Leigh Brackett.

Vol. 1, No. 11, *Out of This World*, by Henry Hasse.

Vol. 1, No. 12, *City of the Living Flame*, by Henry Hasse.

And I guess that's about as good an all-star list you can find in twelve consecutive issues of any mag. A list you should definitely be proud of.

This letter is probably too late to see print, but if you can, publish the part about putting scope up to a vote by the fans. That I would appreciate. Maybe they would, too. . . .

About originals, just in case, the first Leydenfrost, and what a genius that guy is, incidentally.

See, no humor this time. I had too much to say. And still do.

Seriously, if this gets printed, I would like you to undersign with an editors' note, about what you honestly think about the scope situation. I'd really like to know. And it's for the good of the mag. . . .

All true s-f fans should agree with me when I say down with this adventure hack and up with good, sound, adventuresome, scientific tales, with VASTNESS, if you grasp what I mean.

And, in closing, let me remind you, with a reprint of this little epitaph (just for humor's sake).

BENEATH THIS SAND,  
BELOW THE LAND,  
LIES A MAN OF YORE.  
HE'S DEAD.  
BECAUSE HE LOST HIS HEAD,  
THIS POOR EDITOR.

Sincerely,

THE HAPPY GENIUS.

EDITOR'S NOTE: THANKS FOR THE EPITAPH. IT'S MERRIER THAN THE REAL ONE PROBABLY WILL BE. IN REGARD TO MR. L.'S CLAIM AS TO THE CATAclysmic DROP IN THE CALIBER OF PLANET'S STORIES, IT MUST BE ADMITTED. But We Are Getting Lined up With the New Crop of Authors, and PLANET Will Be Back in the Groove Again Before Long. Start With This Issue, and See If We Are Not Right!

## MODEST CUSS, AIN'T HE

3956 Ledgewood,  
Cincinnati, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

The corner drug-store basked drearily in the glaring sunlight. All was quiet and peaceful, with not a soul in sight. But what's this? Coming at break-neck speed over the top of a hill is a bicycle. Through the shimmering heat-waves, its rider can be faintly seen—a boy of unusual handsomeness.

Outside the drug-store it comes to a sudden halt. The handsome rider dismounts. Slowly, and

he is done. My opinions on the Fall issue follow. (Yes, that handsome lad on the bicycle was none other than myself, the Looney Lad of Ledgewood.)

This issue was really swell. Not a single bad story. In fact, every single story was excellent! How can a mere mortal attempt to rate such stories?

Grave doubts creep into my alleged mind. Should I leave the job to Lesser, stay, scram, etc.? No! I, too, have a right to contaminate the Vizi-graph! Consequently, using the not-too-original-but-very-effective 1 to 10 rating system, we have: "Space Oasis"—10. This was really a honey of a yarn. Gallum can really write if he wants to. Swell ending.

"War-Gods of the Void"—9.9. Kuttner comes through again. He's been doing fine work lately. Hang on to him. I especially enjoyed his descriptions of the "North Fever."

"Prison Planet"—9.7½. Tucker at his best. 'Nuff said.

"City of the Living Flame"—9.6. Very much O.K. Hasse is going places.

"Quest of Thig"—9.4. Excellent work for a rather new author. For that matter, excellent work for anyone. That Western angle was well-developed. Saddlebag Publications . . . Reversed Revolvers . . . Very neat.

"Vampire Queen"—9.3. Would have rated higher, except for the fact that I don't care for the suicide angle. The gallant, heroic damsel sacrificing herself for our hero—this rates high in the realm of Hack.

"The Thought-Men of Mercury"—9.1. Too obvious.

"Stellar Showboat"—9. Me no like detectives in S-F.

As you can see, I enjoyed this issue very much. Not one story below 9. You are to be commended, Mr. Editor.

The cover was easily your best to date. It should make the "Good old Dazers" happy. But . . . must we have a female on every cover? It's gotten so that whenever I talk some hapless friend into buying a copy of P. S., I conclude by saying:

"You can't miss it. Look for the one with the horrified damsel on the cover."

Very convenient, but . . . need I go on? However, my advice is to use Leydenfrost as your regular cover artist. He's swell.

Interior pix—hmmmmmm!!! Not as good as last time. Best was, of course, Leydenfrost on pages 2 and 3. Paul and the other Leydenfrost pic take second and third respectively. Rest were fair.

As for the letters, the one and only Hermit, Larry Shaw, Cops top honor. Raymond Washington, Sr., gets the nod for second place. And third, Milt Lesser (knew he'd get in there somewhere).

By the way, I like Cummings—I True, he isn't what he used to be, but he still beats 50% of the present crop of S-F writers. Hang on to him, 'cause some day he will write another of his really great novels.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER.

(The Looney Lad of Ledgewood)



with infinite caution he sniffs the air. An expression of delight crosses his majestic face. With a wild whoop of joy, our hero races into the store, and pauses a moment at the magazine rack.

There it is! The new issue of PLANET STORIES! Clutching it tightly in his hand, he thrusts his leering countenance close to that of the trembling news-dealer.

Dropping 20 cents on the counter, our hero departs, not forgetting one final, melodramatic leer at the cringing proprietor.

Hopping on his bike, he speeds home. Arriving there, he dashes upstairs and locks himself in his room. He reads dear old P. S. It takes him two days, with time out only for meals. And now



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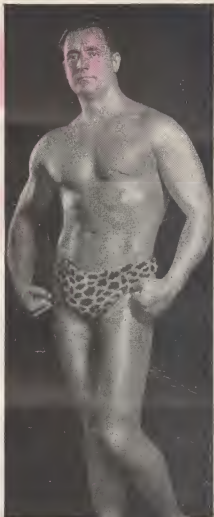
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